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The Lantern, 2017-2018

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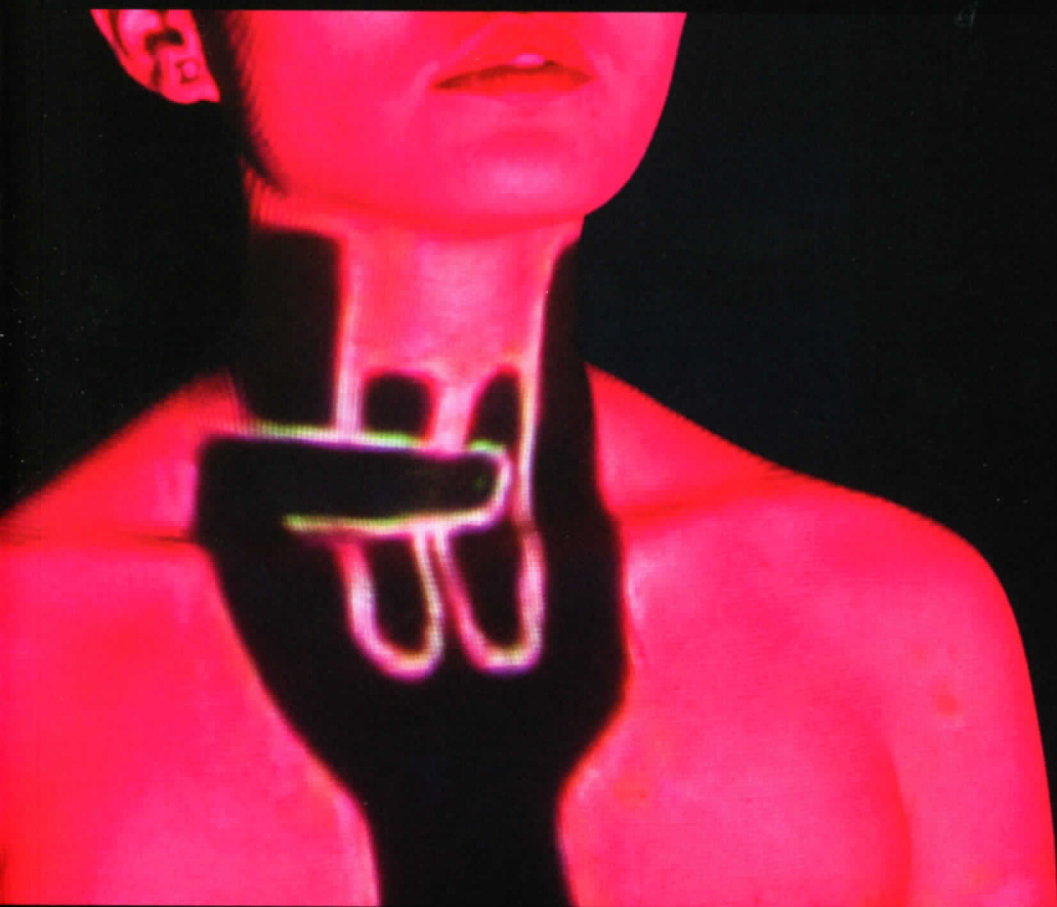
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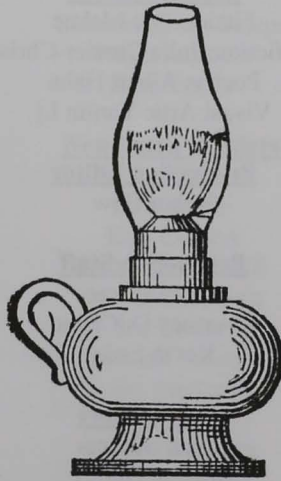
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EDITOR'S NOTE

First off, I'd like to say that I never planned or expected to be Editor, which only makes me more grateful to have taken on this challenge. I certainly didn't make it this far alone, however, so here's my crew of people to thank:

Albert, I took on this position with approximately zero knowledge of the job, so thank you for helpful advice that made me seem a bit less foolish in my struggle. Also, I'm still not your "boss."

Robin, your hard work as Production Editor every year inspired me to stop being lazy and step up for the position of Editor. Seriously, you might as well run the school, you're so hardworking and involved in everything.

Jon, I couldn't have done this without your guidance. Thank you for helping me along this journey of editing, as well as my creative writing career here at Ursinus. In my very first semester here, your intro class taught me how exciting and rewarding creative writing can be, and I've pursued it seriously ever since. I'd also like to thank Dr. Keita and Professor Hong for shaping me as a writer with all their advice and support.

A hearty thanks to all my editors, readers, production staff, and of course contributors! Creating *The Lantern* each year is a long process, and I appreciate the patience and hard work that goes into all aspects of perfecting each issue.

Last, I'd like to thank you—whoever's holding this book. Without readers, we can't have writers. So without further ado, I present to you the 2017-2018 edition of *The Lantern*! We have some amazing content waiting for you.

Solana Warner
Editor 2017-2018

COVER ART: STAND UP

This image was really powerful for me to create. My images are created by projecting images onto nude bodies and creating something completely new! The image projected onto this model is an old feminist poster from the 1960s, and I really enjoyed the aesthetic of it, the hand raised in solidarity forming the lower half a female-bodied person. I loved the positioning of this symbol on the model's throat paired with the title of Stand Up. We must rise, keep fighting, and never give up.

Sydney Cope

POETRY PRIZE WINNER

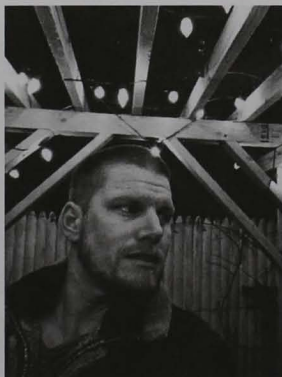
"On Dissociation" by Chiara DeMelfi

The language in "On Dissociation" is incredibly visual and has a beautiful brutality. The details and description of this place to which the narrator finds themselves confined are concrete and superbly chosen. A reader can envision this place, they can sense its latent hostility, and because of this, relate to the narrator. "On Dissociation" is taut, and it's tense, and it's seriously good.

RUNNER UP

"Voyeurs" by Julia Rae Hodenfield

"Voyeurs" is a polyptych of distinct personas, each one a unique voyeur with their own distinguishable, striking voice. The surprise of the language is natural. The descriptions are fresh. The poem drags its reader in and makes them want to see what's next, and that's a quality the best poems have. "Voyeurs" is funny, and fast, and wholly original.



Ian is a graduate of Ursinus College and Rosemont College's Creative Writing MFA program. He grew up outside Philly but now lives in South Jersey where, when the seasons are cold, he works construction on the days he's not teaching Creative Writing and other English courses at Atlantic Cape Community College. In the summer, he lifeguards on the beaches of Ocean City, NJ. Ian's poetry has appeared in *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Streetcake Press*, and *The Blue Monday Review*, among others.

CHIARA DEMELFI

On Dissociation

This place is far too loud.
Dead stinkbugs are scattered like landmines
Underneath the kitchen sink and perched on the windowsill;
Bodies entirely intact in unfortunate circumstance.

The shower floor is covered in clipped pubic hair.
My entire body itches
As I trace the trail of thumb-crushed ants on the wall.
How did they get in my underwear?

Something made quick work of the dead bird on the sidewalk.
I watched its chest torn wide in bacterial nourishment.
Wings crushed by cyclists
As if freedom were a promise readily revoked.

PROSE PRIZE WINNER

“Untouchable” by Emily Shue

Our winning selection for the spring of 2018, “Untouchable,” is not an easy read. Important stories don’t need to be. Given the long-overdue shift of power and agency toward those who have suffered in silence, this story is just as timely as it is gut wrenching. As she struggles to find her voice, though—literally and figuratively—Alyssa is not without her allies. Her story is far from happy, but with any luck, Sammy, Clarence, and the others may at least give her a measure of hope.

RUNNER UP

“The Get Out” by Millie Drury

“The Get Out,” our runner-up, taps into the escape fantasies we all have from time to time. Maybe Rina is exactly what Eddy needs. Or maybe she’s insane. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Regardless, this story raises more questions than it answers, and we come away with our heads spinning at the possibilities.



Matt Cordes ('94) is the owner of WritingWorks, a business and technical writing consultancy. He has ghost written several business books and is under contract with Oxford University Press to write a climate-related text for non-science majors.

EMILY SHUE

Untouchable

Deep in July, rural Pennsylvania comes alive with an unexpected ferocity. Sounds forgotten over the quiet, blank winter roar back in. Cicadas, whip-poor-wills, bullfrogs, and the occasional siren, usually the sign of a bonfire run too late.

We were, for a few seconds each summer, beyond grasp.

The Mennonite and Amish families sat and sold sweetcorn with kernels every color of yellow and gold, home-made whoopee pies that stuck to your fingers, and strawberries picked just that morning, sugar-sweet and tart at the same time. My brother and I rode our bikes and swam in the creek in front of our house. We arched our backs and stood up on our pedals, sliding lazily up and down the freshly paved roads. We caught crawfish with our bare hands and held them up to our ears until they clipped on; we were fearless. We set the tent up in the backyard and made up stories starring our favorite superheroes, and Sammy always held the flashlight with steady hands.

We left apples out back near the clotheslines for the deer and caught rainbow trout in the creek when we weren't swimming in it and found countless baby birds abandoned on the ground, little necks raw and shriveled, peeping endlessly. We hatched luna moths and monarch butterflies in jars, set them outside and saved the empty chrysalis once they had flown away. I ate ants off the sidewalk on a dare, and we chewed on onion grass and went barefoot. Every Friday night, we dug up nightcrawlers in the back yard, thick and wriggling and begging for a hook.

And in these moments, we were briefly, brilliantly, untouchable.

I slammed the door and ran across the gravel lane, tumbling down the bank. My mother slumped in the front seat for a second before following me, more hesitant on the hill that led down to our creek. I threw myself down in the soft red clay that met the water and ripped off my shoes. It was about a two foot drop from the bank to the water, with rocks piled along the sharp edge to serve as steps.

"Lyss! Lysssa, peanut. Don't get my sh—"

I turned around, and she saw my tears. Her face softened.

"Try not to get mud on my shirt, okay, peanut?"

She sighed and turned, making her way up the small hill and across the lane.

I waded out until I was up to my waist, shivering as the water hit my hot skin. It was the middle of July and the sun was relentless, but maybe.... I raised a dripping hand to my forehead. Hot. Maybe too hot. Maybe a fever? A cold? The flu? I squeezed my eyes shut and wished.

"Fire in the hole! Lyss! Hey—hey Lyss! Watch ou—" Eli's goggles hit me square in the face, and I fell backwards into the murky water.

When I surfaced, cheeks stinging, Sammy had Eli in a headlock. My brother was pale and skinny and small, like me. He wore glasses and needed braces and played the tuba in school band because it was the biggest one. So did I.

"Dude, come on," Eli panted. "It was an accident, I swear, come on—" The goggles bobbed up and down in the current behind me, and I snatched them from the water. Sammy caught my eye and grinned.

"C'mon, Lyss, it's only fair."

"What? What are you doing? What is sh—"

Sammy struggled to keep Eli still and peered over his shoulder at the lane, hollering, "Hey, Cl—Clarence! Hurry up! Lyss is gonna zing Eli!" I stretched the rubbery bands back and squinted, wading closer.

Eli's face was red. He was my least favorite of Sammy's friends. He talked to me like I was a baby, even though I was at a higher reading level than he was, and he always groaned when Sammy or Clarence tossed me one of their plastic weapons and told me to keep up. His stomach was doughy and pale and it trembled violently as he squirmed. Eli was bigger, but things like that never seemed to matter when it came to Sammy.

"Seriously, Sammy? Jes—Jesus, fine. Fine! It's not like she'll hit me, she can't aim for sh—" his voice was cut off as the goggles hit flesh, and Sammy released him, yowling.

"Dammit! Dammit, Lyss!"

Eli crowed and leapt up, smug. "That's what you get, dillhole."

Sammy glowered. "Shut UP, man." He examined the red welts on his side and winced. When he turned to me, he was glaring. "Thanks, Lysssa."

I looked at my hands and conjured up the words in my mind, taking a deep breath. *Just like reading. Just like reading, but out loud.*

"S-s-so-so-sorry, Sam-m-m-y."

Behind him, Eli rolled his eyes. Sammy shook his head and sighed, exasperated. I suddenly felt stupid and small and childish, standing there in the water in my clothes, hair dripping, face bright red.

"It's not that big of a deal, Lysss," he said, skipping forward and smacking the red spot on his side with feigned pride. "At least you still hit harder than Eli does."

He sat down on the bank, tapping his feet on the mossy rocks.

"Come on. Today was better, right? It was better, yeah? Come onnnnnnnnn..." His smile grew wider and he dragged it out, refusing to stop until I finally smiled and nodded. Sammy shot up, immediately slipping on one of the stones and falling comically into the water, splashing everywhere. Eli followed him, still sullen. Sammy shook his head and grabbed us both, pulling us under. We came up sputtering and laughing as he roared.

"We are," he pounded twice on his chest and paused, waiting for us to respond.

"Shit, guys, c'mon," he said, "it's no fun if it's just me." He took a deep breath and thumped his chest again, now screaming.

"WE ARE!"

"THE KINGS OF THE CREEK!"

"WHAT?"

"THE KINGS OF THE CREEK!"

"WHO?"

"THE KINGS OF THE CREEEEEEK!"

We were, in fact, the uncontested kings of the creek. We mixed fantasy realms, video games, books, and movies, to create a world we fought to protect. The swimming hole in front of our house was deep, even in the dry summers, and the four of us knew all of it—every log, every stone, every overhanging branch—even better than we knew our own homes. No matter how daunting the enemy, we always won. We were forever the rulers, and we feared nothing.

I fought hard to keep my place in that group. I was the only girl. The little sister, the one who could be kicked out at any time, banished to my bedroom where I would screw my face up tight and scratch the tears off my cheeks when they dared to come. Sammy watched out for me, yes, but he was still my older brother, and we did hate each other occasionally, when we had the luxury.

Clarence, late as always, appeared at the top of the hill, stumbling as he ran. He skidded to a stop, inches from the bank and sat down heavily.

"K-k-kings of the..." He paused, out of breath. "King of the... Creek. Yeah, that's.... Yeah, that's us." I blushed when he looked up and caught my eye, and I was suddenly aware of the wet shirt plastered to my

body, clearly outlining the training bra I was growing out of at a frightening speed. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Hiya, Lyss!" Clarence spoke in strange, sudden quips and said things that are usually only voiced by quirky characters in children's TV shows. I always thought he saw himself like that, as a character, breaking the tension if only by adding a new layer to it. He was awkward and gawky and decidedly uncool, and I was hopelessly in love with him.

"Hi, h-h-h-hi Cl-larence." I blushed even harder.

He climbed carefully over the rocks and into the water. Eli looked us and rolled his eyes, swimming out to the center with Sammy, where they cheerfully began their attempts to drown one another.

"How was it today?"

I looked down again. I was always looking down.

"Yeah," I mumbled, "fine. It w-w-w-it was fine."

Liar.

The spring of my third-grade year, Mrs. Zanlu broke her leg. Our substitute teacher for the rest of the year was Mr. Sykes. It was the first time I ever had a male teacher. And it was when I first started stuttering. I was afraid of all older men, but there was something about Mr. Sykes. His hands were huge, and I could count all the little hairs on the knuckle of his left pointer finger when he leaned over to correct my spelling. His hair was brown and peppered with flakes of dandruff, he was constantly polishing off his glasses on his shirt, his smile was too white. He had stubble and he smelled like man and I wished every day that they would all die, all of them, every single one, and leave us alone.

When I went to my friends' houses, I avoided their fathers. All our teachers in Sunday school were women, with their hard hair sprayed and tucked beneath crisp black bonnets. My father's friends were loud and red-faced and had rough hands that wandered and hurt, just like his. I never spoke to male relatives, which was interpreted as shyness, and I never, ever said hello to the firemen at the school assembly each year.

But Mr. Sykes, I couldn't avoid. He was always there, big and vaguely hateful and too much of something I could never name. He was dangerous. I knew he was dangerous, even more than the rest, although I knew I didn't have any reason to think so. I watched him from behind my book during designated reading hours, ready. Always had to be ready.

In his first week, he picked me to read the quote of the day. I opened my mouth and skipped like a broken record of letters and syllables, mortified. I was quiet, sure, but I had never stuttered. And yet, when I tried to speak in front of the class, in front of him, my throat got

tight and hot and I was acutely aware of all the eyes on me, especially his, and I could only think of his hands and how rough they might be, how unforgiving. At lunch, Arthur Drando snapped my bra strap and asked me if I was done with my sandwich, skipping on the "d" just like I had. I pulled my bangs over my eyes and cried. Arthur went home with a broken nose that day, after a rogue dodgeball left him wailing. Sammy always had good aim.

But it only got worse. I couldn't escape the feeling of terror that had been, until now, dormant in my chest, reserved for birthdays, Christmases, anniversaries—all the special family occasions. It had sprung loose, and Sammy wasn't there to help me push it back in. In May, my mother received a letter from Mr. Sykes expressing his concern and offering his help. He would tutor me, he said, in speech therapy, twice a week over the summer. Fourth grade, he reminded her, was an important year that would be harsh to a speech impediment such as mine.

"Such a bright girl," he told her the first day, as I stood behind her, trying to act as if I wasn't hiding. "I simply don't understand what the problem could be. But!" He clapped his hands. "I am delighted to help! Although I don't think I'm her favorite teacher." He flashed an amused smile my way. A wolf.

My mom shuffled her feet.

"Well, she's a bright girl. And I'm sure you're a fantastic teacher." He smiled, nodding, and waited. He wanted an explanation. "Just.... She's always been... Shy." She chuckled weakly.

"Ah, yes. I was always a bit of an introvert." My mother and I both flinched as he stepped forward, and he paused as a familiar expression started to move across his face. It usually took more than that for people to start noticing. The difference between anxiety and fear is obvious once you start looking, but nobody ever really thinks to look. Mr. Sykes did, though.

"Ooh goodness, I am so sorry," my mother said. "We watched the scariest movie last night and we're all still a bit jumpy." She shook her head and looked down at me smiling. "Lyss and I are quite the scaredy cats." This was where I smiled back and nodded, confirming the lie, cementing my bashfulness. So I smiled back, nodded, and lowered my eyes again.

My mom said quickly, "She was like this around Mrs. Zanlu at first, too." *Liar*. "I think she just gets intimidated with grown-ups, isn't that right, peanut?"

This was when I agreed. So I looked up at her and nodded in agreement, hating her for everything.

Clarence was pulled under suddenly as Eli came at him from behind and pushed him down into the water.

"Who is the dunking king? Who? Who?" He forced Clarence down a few more times before loosening his grip, which was a mistake. The long strand of algae caught in his hair and he let out a satisfying shriek.

"There's your crown, dipstick." Clarence snorted. He turned back to me and shook his wet hair like a dog. The difference between Clarence and almost everybody else was that he always thought to look.

"I, uh, I got the newest Pokémon game. It works with the Color and the Advance." He had a slight lisp that made his words seem rounder, gentler. "You can borrow it if you want."

"Okay."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"And," he said, "you can borrow Dino."

I blinked, shocked. Dino was Clarence's favorite stuffed animal. Nobody was even allowed to hold him. We played with stuffed animals less and less and the boys got older, but Clarence always brought Dino when he stayed the night. He picked a strand of algae off my neck. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for anyone in the whole wide world.

"Seriously, Lyss. Keep him in your backpack. Sic him on Mr. Shits if you need to. He's a T-rex, you know. He likes you."

I wanted to marry him a thousand times.

"Okay."

Sammy's chin was suddenly digging into my shoulder, dripping into my collarbone.

"He's right, you know. We'll make sure he doesn't give you any trouble, darlin'," he said, drawling in a terrible impression of a cowboy. I giggled, but he was suddenly serious. "The Kings of the Creek never abandon one other." I nodded, and he smiled, satisfied. He plunged his hand into the muck and held out a stick, triumphant.

"We drown our enemies! Defeat our foes! Conquer our—uh, our..." he trailed off. "Help me out here, guys, we conquer our..."

"Teachers," I said. Sammy whooped and thrust his stick even higher into the air before whipping around and throwing it onto the opposite bank, a good hundred feet away. Eli and Clarence looked at each other for a split second, then dove forward, kicking furiously, determined to be the first one to claim the stick on the other side.

Sammy wrapped his arms around me and screamed, "WE ARE INVINCIBLE!" before heaving us both backwards into the water.

I spent four hours a day in the library with Mr. Sykes as he tried to coax the words out of me. It wasn't going well. I went from talking to stuttering to whispering to barely speaking at all. He told me to imagine words as I said them, just like reading. He gave me children's books, baby books, and had me read them to him. He made sentences into songs and made me sing them back to him. He gave me a puppet. I drank glass after glass of water, hoping it would open my throat. And every lesson I hated him more and more.

One of our lessons was on Reading Day. The library was usually silent, the occasional bookworm prowling the shelves, sitting down in the middle of an aisle and reading for hours. But on Reading Day, all in county-sponsored camps ages 6 to 14 came to the library and picked a book to read for an hour. It came three times each summer, and I was delighted when Mrs. Sanderson, the severe-looking head librarian, came to our table to warn us of the noise. Mr. Sykes smiled at her, and she narrowed her eyes before walking away. I loved her then.

"Weeee-eeell, Lysssa, looks like we'll have some company!"

I stared at him and he sighed, twisting the ugly silver ring he wore on his thumb. It was starting to turn his skin green.

Mrs. Sanderson stood behind the front desk and glowered as the camps arrived. Each age group wore a different shirt, and the bright colors seemed almost offensive against the smooth, red wood of the bookshelves, the tables, the staircases. The initial madness calmed down once everyone had found their respective sections. The group with bright blue shirts were the oldest. It was their last summer spent crafting and eating stale pretzels under the watchful eye of an exhausted college student, and they were restless. A few of the girls had tied their shirts up, and they were tighter, hugging the waist, emphasizing the chest, secured above tiny jean skirts. The prettiest one had long, tanned legs and chestnut hair that bounced when she laughed. She wore lip gloss and mascara. The other girls watched her eagerly, laughing when she laughed, nodding when she spoke. She was beautiful, and they hated her.

I looked down. I was wearing the shirt my mother saved for cleaning days and Sammy's old basketball shorts, one pocket stained with ink from when his pen exploded. My socks came up above my ankles and looked strangely brilliant against my dirty sneakers. The messy ponytail at the back of my neck was somehow greasy and fuzzy at the same time, and my arms were riddled with bug bites.

I had begged my mother to let me wear her clothes all summer: I was an early bloomer. My own clothes were suddenly tiny. Shirts

stretched mercilessly across my chest, painful and tender and growing too fast for training bras. She always agreed, if only after examining the bruises on my neck and arms and deciding they would be easier to cover with clothes so big I almost drowned in them. Legs were fine; we were so active, our knees were perpetually bruised regardless of our father.

Their giggles made me realize I was staring. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of Mr. Sykes. He was staring too. Not with the half-hearted wish of an adolescent girl, but hungrily. They bent over, stood on their tiptoes, reached to pick books from the shelves, flashing cotton panties and soft thighs, and his lips trembled. His eyes were hard and bright, unblinking, as he drank them in. His mouth was open, tongue tracing his bottom teeth as if to sharpen them. I imagined him holding me in his jaws like a wolf holds a rabbit. He clenched his fists and dug them into his knees, and I flinched. Mr. Sykes's head snapped around to meet my gaze, his face suddenly blank.

"It looks like they need a hand. I'll be right back, ALysssa," he said casually.

They didn't notice his phone, angled expertly beneath their skirts, like he'd done it a thousand times before. They preened and thanked him for his advice, flattered at the attention of an older, handsome man with a brilliantly white smile. He touched the beautiful girl's waist briefly. The frightened look on her face only lasted a second before she smiled and craned her neck up to put her arms around his neck and hug him gratefully. I felt sick.

A few minutes later, they were shuffled out of the room by an exhausted looking counselor. Mr. Sykes back down in the seat closest to me and chuckled. There was no fear underneath. Why should he be afraid? My voice didn't work, anyways. I could barely manage to tell him I had to go to the bathroom.

He put his huge hand on my thigh and I sat, perfectly still. His fingers traced up and down, over the soft peach fuzz that had only just started to grow.

"It's always nice to help out, ALysssa." I nodded.

I heard Sammy, whispering in my ear as we crouched in the closet. *S'okay, Lyss. He's not gonna touch you.*

Mr. Sykes squeezed my thigh once, hard, before withdrawing his hand and sitting back down across from me. He twisted his ring and glanced at his phone.

"I bet you're excited to tell Momma how fun reading day was, right Lyss?" I nodded again.

"And I'm excited to tell her how much you've improved. You're doing very well. You know how to say the things you're supposed to say." He paused. "And how to stay quiet about the things you shouldn't."

My head bobbed up and down. I knew the rules.

"Now, your momma said you're going swimming today, is that right?" Nod.

"Why don't I let you go a little early?" He glanced at his phone again, impatient. "Why don't you tell me if that's okay with you? Like reading a book."

"Yes. Thank you."

He raised his eyebrows, surprised. "Good job." Hesitated. "I'll have Mrs. Sanderson give her a call, tell her we're wrapping up early."

The wooden floors creaked under his weight as he hurried out, slowing down for a moment to bark over the desk to Mrs. Sanderson. She scowled and gestured to me, not even raising her head.

"She-she-sh-she's not home."

"Do you know her mobile phone number? I'd assume you would have your own, but it appears you do not."

The past weekend had marked the death of our third phone in the span of a month. We were not supposed to call for help. Not that we needed to—like mom always said, he just gets frustrated. Not like he means to hurt us. No reason to make a big deal.

I sat outside on the steps until she pulled up, honking cheerfully. I climbed in the front seat. That week's haul included four slightly bent boxes of Frosted Flakes, six jars of pickles a week past the expiration date, fourteen loaves of flattened raisin bread, and an entire carton of Cracker Jack. The weekly allowance my father allotted her wasn't much, and she had to provide all her receipts along with exact change. He oversaw their bank account, and he made sure that all her paychecks were signed over to him in their entirety. We did most of our shopping at Huff's, out near the abandoned Farnell farm, where stores sent their damaged or unpopular merchandise that was still technically sellable.

She smiled. "Better today?"

"No."

"Aw, peanut... Well, Mr. Sykes is just about the sweetest teacher you've ever had. I'm glad he's staying through next year to help Ms. Lersk with counseling."

I thought about the expression on his face when he looked at the girls in the library. Remembered how smoothly he moved his camera, the rise in his pants as he placed his hand on my knee. I thought about the food in the backseat, the locked cabinet of Swiss Rolls and Nutter Butters

and Oreos and fruit snacks back home and the punishment if we ate his food instead of ours. I looked at the Cracker Jack clutched tightly in my mother's hand, the warm brown of her skin, the way her shoulders hunched, like mine had started too, and Sammy's too. I heard the crunch of gravel under the tires, the change in my mother's breathing when we saw the empty driveway. I saw the all too familiar sight of our house, sinking in on itself as if it, too, was tired. I looked at her face, so eager, nose crooked and left cheek still swollen. I lifted my sleeve and examined my bruises. And I hated her.

"So, what's the sentence of today, Lyss?" The car lurched to a stop, and she looked at me over the box of Cracker Jack. Her smile faded as she saw my shoulder, and she began to reach for me. "Lyss, baby, it wasn't—"

"No." I whispered. "No. Fuck you," and wrenched the door open.

It had started to rain, soft swirls *plink*-ing in the water, scaring the bugs away. Eli stormed off after a particularly brutal incident involving me, Sammy, Clarence, and a dead crawfish that turned out to be very much alive. It was warm and sticky, and I floated on my back as I closed my eyes, grateful for the eerie silence that filled my ears along with the water. I imagined what Sammy would say about Mr. Sykes if I told him what happened today. His face would grow dark with rage, and he would go under for a moment, emerge with a calmer, more controlled expression.

"Well, dammit, Lyss."

"Yeah. Jesus," Clarence would chime in.

"We *just* defeated the Balrog and escaped the Orcs, and now you're telling us we have to go kill this guy too?"

Clarence would shake his head, his expression strained. "A Jedi's work is never done, my friend."

"Too true, too true. Although..." Sammy would turn to me, uncharacteristically solemn. "ALysssa. This is your kill."

I saw us sauntering into the library, plastic weapons no longer toys, but deadly, humming with energy. We towered over Mr. Sykes, and he begged for his life. As a knight of the Jedi Order, I would pause, considering the importance of mercy. We would cut him up into tiny pieces, roll him up in a tarp weighed down with bricks, and throw him in further down the creek. Eli would admit he had been wrong all these years, and Clarence would sweep me into his arms and kiss me while Sammy stood back, proud.

I was wrenched out of the water, sputtering, and I caught a quick glimpse of Clarence waving through the rain before he disappeared downstream. Sammy held my arm tight and marched me through the muck

to the bank. The rain was coming down at a steady pace, but we'd swam in harder. I tried to yank myself away, angry.

"Hey, wh-wh-where did—"

"He's gonna get out at his house, Lyss. We gotta go too." I let him help me up the bank but slipped in the mud, giggling.

"Get your shoes, Lyss." I snatched them up and stared at him reproachfully.

"Give them here, Lyss."

"No." I knew I was acting like a brat and I didn't care. I was waterlogged and my arm hurt.

"ALysssa." He used my full name, something Sammy never did. "Give them here."

I handed them to him.

"Alright, now, come on. We're gonna go inside."

We reached the crest of the small hill and I froze, suddenly understanding. Under the water, I hadn't heard him pull in.

Sammy tugged my sleeve. "C'mon Lyss. It's okay."

Our father was a small man. His face was clean shaven and his shoelaces were always tied and the veins in his arms stood out when he clenched his fists. He strode through the rain towards us, his red truck steaming behind him, freshly parked. He almost never came home early.

"Kids," he said pleasantly, "It's raining."

I shivered, and he patted me lightly on the head.

"Why don't we head inside?"

Sammy spoke up, staring evenly ahead, shoulders bent. "We wouldn't want to get the house all mud—"

"Inside." He spat on the ground in front of us and turned, fists at his side. I trailed behind Sammy as we crossed the lane, walked up the driveway, and entered the house. Our father was already sitting in his armchair, calm.

Sammy dropped my hand. "I can get towels."

My father ignored him. "I thought we had agreed," he chuckled softly, "that you two would stay away from the creek when it rained."

We nodded.

"Especially," he laughed softly, "especially when there is a storm."

We nodded again.

He crossed the living room with two quick strides.

"Then why, why were you swimming. In the creek. When it was raining?"

We both looked down.

"DID YOU HEAR ME?" He exploded, then knelt in front of us, perfectly calm once more.

"And who..." he picked my shoes out of Sammy's hands, dangling by the strings. "Who thinks their shoes are waterproof?"

I opened my mouth, but Sammy said jumped in. "They're mine. From last year." He shrugged. "I figured I might as well use them as water shoes. Didn't want 'em to go to waste."

"You didn't want them to go to waste!" our father exclaimed, dangerously cheerful.

"Arthur!" My mother emerged from the hallway, doing her best to smile. "Honey, I didn't realize you'd be back so e—"

"You," he said quietly, and pointed at her without turning his head. "You shut up." She fell silent.

"Now, ALysssa." He licked his lips and took my chin in his hand. "I know these are your shoes, angel. Do you know *how* I know these are your shoes?" He paused, waiting for an answer.

"N-n-n-n—"

"I know these are your shoes, sweet pea," he whispered, growing louder with each word, "because I BOUGHT THEM." His breath was awful, smoke and beer and stale liquor, all in my face. He tightened his grip on my jaw, and I whimpered. Sammy was shaking next to me. With his recent growth spurt, he was almost as tall as our father.

Our mother, who had been inching forward while he spoke, placed a trembling hand on his shoulder and attempted parental comradery, laughing faintly.

"Oh, our kids, they just get messier and messier each day, it's a miracle they..." She trailed off. He stood up and turned slowly, leaning down a few inches to bring his face to hers.

"I thought I told you to keep your mouth shut."

Sometimes, he left. Slammed the door, roaring, screamed out of the driveway and down to the VFW where he would drink and smoke and come back, angry from the alcohol but mellow from the pot, a strange combination of violent mercy. This was when he would either leave or stay, when my mother attempted to intervene.

The slap echoed through the room as his hand snapped out. One, two, and again, for good luck. He tipped her face up to his and kissed her softly on the lips.

"I don't *want* to do that again, baby. Please don't make me."

"I'm not gonna let him touch you," Sammy whispered, pushing me behind him. "Kings of the creek, okay Lyss?" he tapped his hand against my chest twice. "We do not surrender."

But before I could smile, Sammy was clawing at his throat, my father's hand tight around his neck.

"I will discipline *my* children..." he dragged Sammy to him. "...however I see fit. If this little brat," he paused to let go of Sammy, pushing him back, where he crashed into me, "wants to ruin shoes that I bought for her with *my* money, I WILL DO SO."

Sammy shook his head. My father's eyes widened in disbelief as my mother stepped forward, eyes still streaming.

"NO," he roared, and flung her sideways into the empty fireplace. Sammy started towards him but was shoved sideways as well, cracking his head against the brick mantel and slumping down next to my mother, dazed.

He yanked me to him, wrenching my arm nearly out of its socket.

"You don't get your shoes dirty, girl, you understand me?" He slapped me, twice on each cheek, pinched my cheeks and twisted until I could feel my skin shredding. "Now," he grabbed my jaw and pulled his face to his. "Smile." He twisted until my head faced the others. Sammy struggled to his feet with my mother's help. I bared my teeth.

"Good girl." He talked to us like we were dogs who kept shitting on the carpet. Rubbed our noses in it, kicked us, refused to feed us until he was sure we had learned our lesson. He used his hands like electric collars and left fingerprints instead of shocks. We got cold a lot. Had to wear scarves, even in the summer.

He turned my face back to his and wiped the blood from my lips, ever so delicate. He walked to the couch and sat down heavily, dropping his face in his hands. I could hear my shoulder throbbing in the silence, already swollen.

"You can't keep doing this to me, kids." Sammy was by my side. He pulled me into his chest and kissed the top of my head, tears spilling onto his cheeks. My mother put her arms around us.

"If you would just behave..." our father looked up at us, heartbroken. He shook his head and strode silently out of the house, face twisted with anguish.

We stood there for a long time, the three of us, not speaking. It wasn't usually me. When we broke apart after what seemed like hours, Sammy took my hand, refusing to meet my eyes.

"Lyss...Lysssa, I'm so sorry," he said, choking. "I couldn't—" I shushed him and thumped my fist on my chest twice.

"We are," I whispered, and Sammy smiled weakly.

"We are," I said, louder, waiting for his response.

"The Kings of the Creek."

CREAGER PRIZE WINNER

"After 'Rocket Man'" by Matt Dwyer

When literature is at its best, it feels of its moment and timeless, something that "After 'Rocket Man'" both confronts and embodies. Perhaps that's because the poem opens with a question that grounds the reader in the present political age as much as it asks them to look back on the past 75 years of American history. It leads the reader through imagery of American exceptionalism, but also reminds us of how quickly that can be undermined and lost.

RUNNER UP

"On Dissociation" by Chiara DeMelfi

Depending on who you ask, "body-horror" can mean very different things. "On Dissociation" explores the many facets of this concept, from the grotesque to the personal, in three vivid stanzas. It reminds the reader that in life's mundanity and cruelty, there is also transformation.



Abigail Raymond is a member of the Ursinus class of 2011 and a previous *Lantern* editor. Formerly a staff writer at The Wharton School and a literary publicist, she currently works with clinical data at ERT. Abigail lives in Philadelphia and continues to write and craft in her free time.

MATT DWYER

After 'Rocket Man'

Can't we be better
at this by now?

Or will voyager
have to return to
a sun-dried earth,
press sonnets in
the dirt and
gyrate, enculture
the cockroaches;

Tell them:
we did more
than just build
catacombs,
Louis was here
too, and you
can still hear
him singing through
a smile.

SOPHIA GAMBER

Three Thoughts about My Bedroom

I.

It was cold today, and the heater's on.
I sleep alone these days, and my bed is empty, except for me.
Tonight, I sit beside my plants in the windowsill,
cooing softly to them and calling them my darlings.
The little African violet, who he never got to meet,
sits with her leaves sunburnt and broken
from too many long summer days
and not enough water to recover.
She hangs on. I nurse her as best I can.
I think I will call her Laura, or Grace,
or some other name that I have always wanted
to name a baby girl, wrapped in warm dirt,
swaddled in damp soil. I look out the window.
I look back at the violet.
I can't help but think, certainly,
somebody must love us all.

II.

It was not so long ago now that
a man once curled beside me in my bed
so chastely and so gently that I fell asleep,
but just for a moment, and we left the lights on,
and I learned then what it was to be touched by a man
who did not want to own me.

They say Saint Thomas was a builder before he was sailor,
and he died in Chennai, where I once slept two nights alone
in a hostel with a patio on the roof that looked out over the city.
And Thomas had graceful fingers that probed
the wounds of Jesus where the nails once were
and he cried out, *my Lord, O, my God,*
for he had doubted, but he touched the wounds
so chastely and so gently, and he became a sailor,
twin of Jesus, who slept upon the sea.

And I slept beside that man so chastely and so gently,

but just for a moment, and we left the lights on.
I dreamed of that God that loves us all
and of the children I will have one day, and of Jesus,
born to a single mother, in love with a prostitute,
killed beside thieves, and *Thoma*, yes,
I did also dream of *Thoma*, "Didymus," twin of Jesus,
who doubted until he saw the Truth and left the Lights on.
And when I awoke I thought, surely, I had seen some truth:
Someone still might be able to love me.
Surely, I might still be able to love someone.
Surely, *my Lord, O, my God*, somebody loves us all.

III.

I bought new sheets today. White with little yellow flowers.
The blue sheets still remind me of the boy who tried to love me
for a long time and did reasonably well until I told him I needed
to be loved by someone who could never love me as much
as he loves God and children and flowers on the windowsill.

It feels like such a long time ago now that
we used to lay awake, naked on the old blue sheets,
and talk of a time, later, when things would be easier.
And I would say, "I can't wait to marry you one day,"
and he would say, "Let's not rush things too quickly."
I would water the plants and hold each one in my hands,
whispering Sanskrit prayers I learned from Sister Renu
when I lived in Banaras on the Ganges:
Ram naam satya hei, "the name of God is Truth."

I loved the boy who slept naked beside me on the blue sheets
from far away while I was living in Banaras on the Ganges,
and he would sometimes whisper into the phone,
"Don't worry, you're still the one I love the most," only hours
after he had laid naked beside another woman in another bed.
Her name was Laura, or maybe it was Grace.

"I may be a Saint Thomas Christian,
but I love the Vedic mantras," Sister Renu said.
"Saint Thomas came to Kerala and Tamil Nadu,
they say he sailed or maybe he walked, I don't know,
and he brought the Word with him and the Word

is Truth and Light but it hurts, my darling, it will hurt."

I say this now to my plants on the windowsill,
Ram naam satya hei, every time I water them,
and now my bed is covered in little yellow flowers
and no man has ever slept on them.

No man has ever whispered to me on these sheets,
"I love you, but let's not rush into things too quickly,"
while we curled naked here, and I have never had
to keep myself from saying, "Darling, I will never love you as
much as I love God and children and flowers on the windowsill."
And no man has ever held me so chastely or so gently while
I slept softly, dreaming of what it would be like to be loved by
someone who knows the names of the plants on the windowsill.
No, I sleep alone now on white sheets with yellow flowers
and my bed is empty, except for me.

I pray to the plants on the sill, "Surely, somebody loves us all?"
The little African violet, who he never got to meet,
whispers to me through her wiltedness,
"Surely, darling, if you would just leave the Lights on,
you might still remember how to sleep alone."

COURTNEY DUCHENE

Painting Day

The sign from my grandfather's shop hangs above our garage. Underneath the black, Western style *Wilson's Automotive Repairs* logo, a vivid mural depicts Ojibwa hunters chasing a herd of bison across the plains while a massive, black striped, prairie dog with wide, terrified eyes watches from the foreground. It was painted in 1945, when a traveling artist from St. Paul stopped at a bar in Flom and ran into my grandfather, a fresh off the boat GI with a Navy's pension and a dream of starting up a little garage in his hometown. It cost him \$20 and two cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

My father, a community college art major, often remarks that the sign was the nicest part of my grandfather's shop. The prairie landscape reminds him of Van Gogh pieces in the late 1880s after he discovered his lighter palette. On the first warm Sunday of each year, he sets up an easel and repaints the sign in our driveway. It has become a yearly event, as neighbors gather on their porches to watch as Arthur Wilson, the town butcher, uses his fat, sausage packing hands to graze clouds into the skyline and add wistful yellow strokes to the plains. His touch ups never last beyond June. Minnesota spring and sleet always wash his additions away. As his hard work runs in colored streaks down the driveway, he comments that next year, he will wait until it is warm for good to repaint the sign. He never does, though. He is governed by his regularities.

He acquires the sign on the day his father dies. It is the only thing left to him in the will. I can still hear the break in his voice as he comes out of the hospital room, followed by my Uncle Wilson, and whispers in my mother's ear, "I got the sign."

When they exit, Uncle Wilson, takes a sharp right into the hallway beside us, cussing, "mother fucker," under his breath. I am nine years old then, and this is the first time someone who isn't on TV has sworn in front of me. My eyes flit across the room to where my mother stands, holding my bereaved father, and then back to Wilson and his cowboy boots clacking loud down the hallway. I am supposed to be helping my five-year-old little sister, Dolores, with a puzzle so that she stays out of the grown ups' way. Instead, I sprint down the hallway after Wilson.

Uncle Wilson is my father's only brother. His first name is Travis, after my grandfather, but everybody has called him Wilson or Little Wilson, since he was a baby. His greyish yellow stained teeth and scaly, psoriasis stained skin make him look like he is in his mid-sixties, but he is

52—ten years older than my father. After every family gathering, my mother warns us that we will grow up to look like Uncle Wilson if we ever touch cigarettes.

Wilson stands in the glow of a street lamp outside the hospital and shakes out a cigarette from a pack of Camels. He is still swearing—“fucking hell” this time—and he kicks the lamppost with the steel toe of his boot. I watch through the window as Aunt Beatrice follows him outside.

“I can’t believe Dad left Arthur the sign. Fucking asshole,” he says as she approaches him.

“But he left you the shop,” she says. Her hand hovers over his shoulder, as if she is afraid he will strike her if she touches him. “Isn’t that worth more?”

“The shop’s a piece of shit.” Wilson spits as he talks. “The foundation’s crumbling. It’s practically falling into the ground.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Dad should’ve left me more. I’m the fucking oldest.”

“What do you want to do?”

Wilson thinks for a moment before flicking his cigarette to the ground and stomping it out with his toe. “I want to convince Arthur to give me that fucking sign.”

In the waiting room, Dolores is unmoved, fixated by the 50 pieces of grain elevator and country highway waiting to be reassembled in front of her. My mother sits in a waiting room chair while my father speaks to my grandmother inside the hospital room.

“Where did you go?” she asks.

“The bathroom. I got lost.”

She nods. My father and grandmother exit the room just as Wilson arrives. “Well, Arthur,” Wilson says. “I figured we better head on over to the shop and get things straightened out.”

“It’s 11:30,” my father says. “Isn’t it a little late to be doing this tonight?”

“I’m out combining all week for the Jacksons.” Wilson spits a little as he talks. The droplets land on my father’s shirt. “Hired men don’t have the flexibility they give you over at the grocery store, you know.”

“Alright, we’ll go tonight,” my father says.

When we arrive at the shop, my father asks Wilson if they can take a moment of silence. Both men fold their hands and turn their heads towards the ground. My father closes his eyes, but Wilson lets his wander. He looks more bored than mournful. After a couple of seconds, he looks up at the sign and says, “Gee, Dad sure loved that sign.”

"Yes, he did," my father responds.

"What do you suppose you're gonna do with it?"

My father sighs and crosses his arms. "I don't know," he says.

"Maybe I'll hang it on the front of the house. It's a real nice mural, and its got the family name and all."

"Well if you find you don't have a place for it, I'm happy to take it off your hands. It would be great to pass on down to my boys."

"That's okay, I'm sure I can find somewhere."

Wilson shrugs. "Suit yourself," he says and moves towards the shop door with the key.

Inside, the shop is cavernous. It is empty, save for a wooden fishing boat and a dusty red race car.

"Well, hot dog, that's a Mustang Mach 1," Wilson says. He strides over and runs his hand along the car's exterior. "This musta been why Dad never sold the place after he let go of the house. This car's gotta be worth \$30,000 dollars." Wilson's face bursts with glee. "He musta left me more than I thought."

"Yeah," my father says absent-mindedly. He hasn't taken his eyes off the boat since we entered the shop. It has a little wooden body and peeling red paint and a two-stroke engine. My father has wanted a boat since before I was born. He still keeps a jar in his office full of birthday money, Christmas bonuses, and spare change to save up for it. Each time he gets close to enough, however, something more important rears its head. The last time he got close to purchasing one, my mother's car broke down and needed a fifteen-hundred-dollar repair.

My father walks around the boat, examining its body and interior. He opens the live well and looks under the seats. I can see him tracing out the plans to refurbish it in his mind. A fresh coat of paint, new upholstery for the seats, and the four stroke Mercury motor he keeps mounted in our garage at home. "He really left you some boat," he says to Wilson.

"Eh, that little thing? I've got a better one down at the lake, but this car though..." Wilson's eyes fill with hunger. "Say, do you need any help with that sign? 'Cause I'd like to spend a little time going through here. Make sure there aren't any more surprises in the drawers, you know."

"Don't you think I should go through it with you? Help divide things up?" my Dad asks.

"I mean, Dad left me the shop," Wilson says. "That means everything inside it too."

"I'm not sure that's what Dad meant," my father protests. "He was really shaky there towards the end. His memory wasn't great."

Wilson squared himself up, as if preparing for a fight. "I know what Dad would want," he says real confident. "I'm the oldest after all. I share his name."

My father nods. "Yeah, okay," he says as he turns towards the door. "I guess I'll take down the sign."

"Holler if you need anything," Wilson says. He turns his attention towards the car. "I'll just be in here, trying to find the keys for this damn thing."

As soon as we get outside, we hear the rev of the Mustang's engine. "I can't believe he's gonna keep all that for himself," my mother says.

"Bethany," my father says as he stares into her eyes. "Can you please just take the kids and wait in the car while I get this sign down."

My mother huffs. "C'mon kids," she says as she takes our hands in hers. She drags us to the car as my father mounts the ladder and starts unscrewing the sign.

We watch from the car as my Dad tries to maneuver the sign into our trunk. When he finally realizes it's too big, he walks to the home of the hardware store owner and persuades him to open up the shop and sell him a set of bungee cords. We ride home with the sign strapped to the top of the car.

We see Uncle Wilson a few days later for the funeral. He is dressed sportingly, in a new suit and tie. My grandfather's silver watch sits on his wrist. When we arrive, he is standing in the lobby, engaged in conversation with a friend of my grandfather's. He gestures wildly with his left arm so that the watch catches glimmers of the sunshine and reflects them into people's eyes. His new Mustang is parked in the fire lane.

"Jesus," my mother says when she sees him. "Did he pull that watch right off the corpse?"

Wilson strides over to my father when he catches sight of us. "Arthur," he says. "Where the hell is mom?"

"I thought you were bringing her..."

"You think there's room in that car for my boys and Mom too?"

"You live right next door."

"Well, you better hurry and get her," Wilson says. "Her husband's funerals about to start, for chrissakes."

My father shoots a pleading look to my mother who throws her hands up in the air. "Give me the keys," she says. "C'mon girls."

My father mouths thank you as we head towards the door.

We speed all the way to my grandmother's house and still don't make it back in time for the funeral. We are on the steps of the church

when my Dad, aided by Wilson's five sons, carries the casket out. My grandmother stands in the middle of the sidewalk as the funeral procession weaves out. "Why didn't you wait?" she asks. "Why didn't you wait?"

No one ever answers her. Not the priest, not my father, not Wilson. Looking back, I think that was the cruelest part of it all. The woman's husband had died, and no one waited for her to start the funeral. The least they could have done is told her why.

After the funeral, we all head down to Uncle Wilson's lake cabin for a family meal. The cabin is small—two bedrooms and kitchen. There's an outhouse up the hill with a little outdoor shower. The cabin is positioned right on the edge of Lake Six, and it looks out onto the two docks my father helped Wilson build. They only own a small piece of the lake front, but Wilson still brags all the time about his cabin. He bought it four years ago and he tells the people in church that it's his man cave. He says he takes his boys up here to hunt and fish and learn to be real men. In Wilson's story, there are no girls allowed.

One only has to look at the inside of the cabin to know that this is a lie. Aunt Beatrice's touches are everywhere from the little embroidered curtains to the bright peach walls. The only part of the decorations that belong to Uncle Wilson are the little painted fish statues he hangs on the walls of their bedroom. Aunt Beatrice has even covered the ugly cement floors with scatter rugs. She makes everyone wear slippers to keep them from dirtying.

Mom pulls me and Dolores into a bedroom to change when we arrive. It's too cold to go swimming, but she slaps a swimsuit on me anyway because she knows I'm dying to dive in. I love the water. I spent hours sitting on the dock last summer with my legs dangling in the water.

I catch my nineteen-year-old cousin Darren staring at us through the crack in the door as we change. My mom must see him too, because she quickly slams the door and mutters, "fucking meth head," under her breath. "Sorry girls," she says as she pulls my sister into her swimsuit bottoms. "Mommy shouldn't talk like that."

When we exit the bedroom, I see that Darren has broken Aunt Beatrice's only rule. He has stomped through the living room in steel toed work boots.

"Darren, I wish you wouldn't do that," she scolds him.

Darren doesn't acknowledge her. He goes over to the fridge and takes out a beer even though he's only 19. I have always stayed far away from Darren. He is missing his two front teeth, and he whistles a little when he talks. Last year at Christmas, he sat in a chair in front of the fire place and sang, "All I Want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth," like it

was the chorus to a horror movie. He brought his girlfriend to the funeral and she wore a dress that had cut outs around her midsection. She is always two steps behind Darren.

Darren strides back into the living room with his beer. He sits in the big recliner that used to be reserved for my grandfather and cracks it open. His girlfriend sits on his lap. Her legs dangle over the chair arm.

"That's grandpa's chair," Aunt Beatrice reminds him.

"He ain't gonna use it." Darren and his girlfriend proceed to start making out on the chair.

Since Darren is inside, I head outside where I find my father admiring grandpa's old boat. Wilson has built a new lift for it beside his newer, plexiglass model.

My father runs his palm along the boat's edge. "Careful," I warn him. "You'll get a splinter."

He turns his head and laughs at me. "Come here," he says.

I walk down the dock towards him. He lifts me into the boat and places my hand along its edge. Slowly, he moves my palm over the wood's polished edges.

"This wood is sealed," he explains. "To protect the boat from the water and prevent rot. It's not like the porch at home. It won't give you a splinter."

I wrinkle my nose. "Well, you should still be *careful*," I say.

"Splinters hurt really bad and Mom has to dig them out with a needle."

"I'll be careful," he promises.

He continues his examination of the boat by tilting up the outboard motor and pulling the weeds off of the propeller. "Looks like Wilson's been putting her to use," he says.

"Actually, I just drove her out here from the public access," Wilson says. He offers a pack of Camels to my father as he tucks a cigarette between his teeth.

"I'm good." My father puts up a hand. "Quit when the kids were born."

"I forgot your wife has you whipped." Wilson pinches his cigarette between his thumb and first finger and takes a long drag. When he is ready, he releases the smoke in my father's face. "I know how to keep my woman in line."

"I wanted to do it," my Dad says. He continues fiddling with the propeller to avoid meeting Wilson's eyes.

"You thinking of taking her out onto the lake?" Wilson asks.

"Oh, I don't know, I was really just looking."

"Go on." Wilson passes my father the keys. "Take her for a spin."

My father turns the keys over in his hand, weighing his decision.

"I'll grab you a couple of poles and you can take your girl fishing. The boys and I were just 'bout to head out and try and catch dinner."

"Daddy, can we please go?" I put my hands on my father's knees. I had never been fishing before, but the summer before I made a pole with a stick, some butcher's string, and a pop top. I sat outside the golf course pond for hours waiting for something to bite.

My father looks from my pleading eyes to Wilson standing on the dock grinning.

"C'mon," Wilson says. "I got some extra poles in the shed. Make your little girl's day."

"Yeah, okay. I'd love to take out the old boat," Dad says.

This time, I get to pick out a real pole from the shed as my father goes inside to tell my mother and Dolores where we're going. It is almost five and a half feet tall and Uncle Wilson has to carry it for me. We lay the poles on the bottom of the boat and my Dad spins the wheel to lower it from the boat lift. Once it's in the water, he lifts me into the boat.

"How fast do you want to go?" he asks.

"As fast as we can."

My dad laughs. "That won't be very fast with a two stroke, but I'll see what I can do." He backs the boat out of the lift and, as soon as we have a straight shoot, bears down on the throttle.

I hang my arm off the side of the boat and let it glide through the water as we go. The boat's hull bounces as we cut across Wilson's wake.

"Aren't we supposed to follow Uncle Wilson?" I ask.

Dad stares at Wilson's boat, bouncing off in the other direction. "I don't want the area to be too crowded."

I nod, understanding that it is nice to be away from one's sibling for a moment.

My dad leans back and runs his hands through the water after he drops the anchor. I look into the shallow water and spot a school of sunfish circling in the sand. "Dad," I say. "Look at all the fish."

My father leans over to watch them and chuckles. "We'd have to catch a thousand of those little guys to feed our family." He reaches into the tackle box and attaches a neon green lure to my hook.

We drop our poles into the water. I press the button and watch as my line sinks straight down. I fling the pole back and forth through the water in an effort to cast. "I can't do it," I whine.

"Shh, you'll scare the fish." My Dad put his hands over mine and helps me reel in my excess line. Once the line is tight, he moves my

fingers over to the button that releases it. "To cast," he says. "Press the button right as you swing the pole over."

He guides me through the motions and watches as I practice a few more times on my own. "How'd you learn to fish?" I ask.

"My dad taught me," he says. "We used to go out on this same boat almost every weekend when I was a teenager."

"Did Uncle Wilson go with you?"

"No," my Dad reels in his line, so that the lure floats at the surface of the water. "Things were hard for him. He was in Vietnam then."

"Why?"

"Because he was twenty-two. That's what twenty-two year olds had to do back then."

"Did he use it when he was a kid?"

"No, grandpa didn't really have time for fishing when Wilson was younger. He was busy trying to get the shop started and then busier trying to keep it going. He worked a lot."

"If he didn't use the boat ever why didn't he give it to you?"

"I don't know, Ruth Ann." My father sighs. "Sometimes things are complicated."

"Well, I like this boat a lot, and I think you should ask Uncle Wilson for it since he never used it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Besides," I add. "He already has another one."

We spend the rest of the afternoon catching sunfish that my father can wrap his whole hand around. He lets us save every fish in the live well, though. By the end, we catch about twenty of them.

"I know it's not a thousand," I say as we head back. "But I still think we did pretty good."

"We sure did."

When we get to the cabin, everyone is crowded around outside the far dock where Wilson has docked his boat. "I wonder what's going on over there?" my Dad says as he steers the boat into the lift.

"I dunno," I say. "But we should go over there and ask Uncle Wilson for the boat now. I bet he's in a good mood with all those people around him."

When we get to the dock, I see what all the fuss is about. Uncle Wilson has caught a Walleye the size of a five-year-old child. He holds it up to Dolores for comparison.

"Look at this," he says. "Snap a picture so everyone can see it was as big as her."

Dolores shrinks away from the fish. "Icky," she shrieks.

"I'll hold the fish for the picture," I shout. I push my way through the crowd towards Uncle Wilson. "Please, I wanna hold the fish."

"Well, okay then." Wilson positions the fish in my arms as if it were a baby. "Snap away," he says to Aunt Beatrice.

My father pushes to the front just as the picture is being snapped. The fish squirms in my arms as I dump him back into Wilson's live well.

"That's quite the fish you've got," my father says.

"Yeah, she'll make one helluva dinner." Wilson says. "Did you catch anything?"

I open my mouth to tell him about our Sunnies, but my father speaks first. "No luck today," he says. "Not a fish in sight."

"Well that's just how it goes sometimes," Wilson says before turning to me. "Do you want to help me clean this big fish, kiddo?"

I follow my uncle as he carries the fish over to a tree stump. It thrashes in his arms the entire way. "Stupid animal," he says and kicks the trunk when one of the fins cuts his hand. He slaps the fish on the trunk and presses its body down with his other hand. "Get my knife outta my back pocket," he says to me. "This fucker's a real piece of work."

I retrieve the knife and watch as my uncle slides it from the base of the fish's tail up to his gills. Once the body is open, he uses a kitchen spoon to scoop the insides out onto the stump. "It'll give him a cedar flavor," he laughs and pulls the fish's skin off with his bare, bloody hands. "Will you get me a bucket?" he asks. "I've gotta keep the skin wet."

I head down to the lake where a water pail lays against the shoreline. When I come back to the stump, I see my father standing beside Wilson.

"You know Wilson," he says. "My kid really liked being out on the boat today."

"You should take her more often," Wilson says as he scrapes the meat off of the fish's bones.

"I know, but it's been hard. You see I've been trying to get myself a boat for a couple a years... I have this four-stroke motor... anyway, times have been hard at the store and..."

"Times wouldn't be hard if your boss would sell his meat at a fair price." Wilson grunts. "Four bucks a pound for ground beef is just too much."

"I know," my father says. "And I was wondering if, maybe, you could help me out, as my brother..." He backpedals. "I'm not asking for money just... I thought I might have Dad's boat. Since you already have another..."

"Well, Dad left it to me," Wilson says flatly.

"Yes, but it was kind of unclear what he meant."

"I think it was perfectly clear," Wilson says. "You got the sign with my name on it and I got that crumbling old shop and everything in it. Doesn't that seem like a fair deal?"

"Our name," my dad sighs. "Nevermind," he says as he turns away. "Just forget I asked."

Wilson lets him wallow for a moment before calling him back.

"Arthur, you know what, you can have the boat. I don't really need it."

"Really?" My father stays several paces away, unsure if Wilson is to be believed.

"Yeah, like you've said I've got one. You can have the boat on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You give me the sign."

"Wilson," my father says. "That's all Dad left me."

"Yeah, I know, but you can pretend he left you that boat you two were always out on without me. It'd be nice if I gave it to one of my boys. Darren's almost 20, you know. He's about to get a place with that chickie of his. And he'll need a job." Wilson pauses for effect. "I was thinking about helping him reopen Wilson's, you know, make Dad proud since you never took it up."

"I was trying to go to college..."

"For what? A shitty art degree. Dad spent all that time with you in the garage, tryin' to teach your teenage ass something practical while I was off in the military and look how you repay him. No shop, no sons."

My father openly grimaces. The fact that my parents haven't had a boy yet is a touchy subject for my parents. Since Dolores was born, my mother has been pregnant four times. Each time, she miscarries before they tell anyone. I only know, because I have caught her crying in the bathroom over the little blue baby shoes too many times.

"Forget it," my father says. "I'm keeping the sign."

"Suit yourself," Wilson says as he turns back to his bloody fish.

It was then that the rivalry between Wilson and my father took shape in my mind. I hide behind the shed as my father passes. He wipes a tear from his eyes as he walks.

When I am sure that he is gone, I carry the sloshing bucket up to Wilson.

"There you are," he says as I set the bucket down. He slips the skin inside. "Gotta keep it wet," he says.

"What for?" I ask.

"For stuffing of course. I'm gonna have this baby mounted like my other ones."

"The fish on your wall were alive?"

"Every single one of them. Hell, I would've stuffed your grandfather if they'd have let me. Come here, let me show you how they take the eyes out of his head, so they can put in the painted ones..."

I ran towards the dock where my father is sitting. He too collected fish, but they were painted plaster ones we could buy at the dollar store. It never occurred to me that the fish on the wall in the cabin had been alive.

When I reached the dock, I find my father dumping the fish back into the lake.

"What're you doing?" I ask.

"They're... they're not as good as Wilson's fish... We'd barely get any meat off of them."

"Do you know Uncle Wilson kills his fish and put them on his wall?"

My father nods. "It's a part of life."

"Not my life." I sit down beside him on the edge of the dock.

He reaches into the live well and hands me a fish. "Do you want to toss the last one in?"

I take the wriggling body and let it fall from my hands into the water. "Can I take off my shoes?" I ask. "I want my feet to go swimming with the fish."

"Sure," my father says. He takes off his shoes too and puts his legs in the water beside mine. He stares out at the horizon, eyes still red from tears.

"Uncle Wilson is a meanie," I say.

"Yeah." His voice cracks a little.

I don't say anything about the boat then. To this day, the closest we have ever come to talking about it is when I said, "Uncle Wilson is a meanie."

"Kids," my Aunt Beatrice yells at us from the porch. "Dinner's ready."

We head inside and that is when I make my move. When everyone is packed into the one wall kitchen I sneak into the bedroom and rip Uncle Wilson's fish off their mounts one by one. I dig my fingernails into their eye sockets and pull out their painted, marble eyes. After I remove the eyes, I start on the gills, tearing the metallic scales from tail to cheek just like Wilson did when he sliced the skin off of the walleye. I chuck the mounts against the wall as I finish dismembering Wilson's cemetery trophy collection.

I hear a crash as I am tearing, and I am certain an adult is coming down the hallway. I shove the dilapidated fish under the bed and run into the living room before I am caught.

Dolores is shrieking. The rest of the family is in there. I sneak behind Aunt Beatrice's skirt.

"What the hell were you thinking?" My father yells at Darren.

"I dunno," Darren mumbles. "We were playing."

"You were wrestling with a girl one fourth your size."

"Lay off him, Arthur," Wilson says. "He's just being a kid."

"Lay off him? He hurt my daughter."

"She'll be fine. Now, apologize to my son."

My father looks Wilson in the eyes, before walking out of the cabin.

Darren slumps down in the chair. "What," Uncle Wilson says, "were you thinking?"

"Look, I know you think I'm fucking stupid, just say it," Darren says. He snaps his head away from Wilson and his eyes meet mine. Dolores never tells us what happened that caused her to break her arm, but I remember Darren watching us through the doorway. As his eyes pierce through my skin, I back into Wilson's bedroom and lock the door.

I pull the fish out from under the bed and spread their mutilated bodies over the sheets. One by one, I place each marble eye onto the pillowcases in the shape of my name, Ruth Ann Wilson.

When I am finished, I find my parents on the porch with Aunt Beatrice.

"Will she be alright?" my father asks. He cradles Dolores in his arms.

Aunt Beatrice, a nurse, gently pressed down on her arms. "I think it's broken," she says.

"Shit," my father mutters. "Why do we have these cement floors?"

"Calm down," my mother says. She takes the still screaming Dolores from him. "Let's get her to the ER."

The rest of the family follows us out. Two of Wilson's sons shove dinner in the trash. "Wilson," my father says. "Can you drive Mom home?"

"Yeah, okay," Wilson says. "Darren took off with his girl anyway."

My father rushes toward the car.

"Arthur," Wilson stops him. "Have you thought at all about the boat?"

"You're out of your Goddamn mind." My father slams the door.

We leave before anyone goes into the bedroom to find out what I have done. Wilson's middle son, Travis Jr. the Third, goes out to the cabin one last time in November to drive home the boats and lock up the place for the winter. I know he doesn't look in the master bedroom because we have a nice, non-confrontational Christmas with the whole family.

I don't hear about the fish or the sign again until Wilson goes down to open up the cabin again that spring. He turns around as soon as he sees the master bedroom and drives to our house with Darren tailing him.

When he arrives, he sits on our porch ringing our doorbell, repeatedly, and pulling whiskey from his fifth. "Arthur," he keeps calling. "I know you're home. You won't b..b..believe what that damn kid of yours did. You owe me that sign."

Darren is with him. He runs around the house banging on the windows. "Come out you damn kid," he calls.

Our babysitter, a frightened 13-year-old named Kathy, forces us to turn off all the lights and hide in the laundry room. Wilson keeps ringing and shouting, "dammit Arthur, I know you're home. Jus' gimme Dad's sign. Darren's got his girl pregnant. We need that shop. The sign'll let 'em know it's a business they can trust. You know, remind 'em who the Wilson's are."

When Dad gets home, he is livid. I watch from the window as his arms flail and his face grows red. My arms are wrapped around the belly of the five-year-old sister I am lifting so that she can see too. My mom stands beside us. We are all in our nighties. My mother says, under her breath, "I've never seen him like that before."

My Dad tells my mother to call the police when he gets inside. Wilson and Darren are still outside on the lawn.

"Are you sure?" my mother asks as he heads down to his office. "He's your brother."

My father never answers her. She waits a half hour, but when Wilson and Darren keep banging, she calls and files a complaint for trespassing.

We don't hear from Wilson for another two weeks when he calls to tell us that Darren has been indicted. Apparently, the police found drugs in his car when they came to drag him off our lawn.

"This is all your fault," Wilson screams through the phone. "You planted the drugs in his car and called the police because you don't want Darren to be successful."

"Wilson," my father says. "You're acting crazy."

"I'm not," Wilson insists. "You're afraid if he's better than you, you'll have to give him his rightful sign."

"I'm not entertaining this conversation anymore," my Dad says evenly. "Dad left me the sign."

"Only because he thought you'd have a son. And I heard at the casino that your woman got her tubes tied a long time ago. After kid two. You've been lyin' to Mom so she won't take that sign."

"Wilson, you're saying some fucked up shit. Please, before you regret running your mouth..."

"It's too late for that, I already told her. I'm just calling to say Mom and Beatrice don't want you at Christmas. Since you want to prevent the family name from going on."

"Wilson," my father says. "Good- bye."

For ten years, we have been the only Wilsons my family speaks of. The last time we were all together was at my grandmother's funeral. Dad and Wilson sat on different sides of the aisle. We still saw Darren's girl every now and then, strung out on her bike with a little sun burned baby on her back. She never spoke to us and we never spoke to her, except when my mother murmured, "poor thing." We are the only Wilsons that exist on our side of town and our line will die out with me. My father repaints the sign every year just to proclaim that he is still one of them. That he is still the younger son of Travis Wilson even if his daughters can't pass the name on.

TEDDI CAPUTO

Mother

My mother told me she loves warm breezes.
She's been waiting to feel one for a while now.
Hot, sticky Florida air never sated
her childhood longing for a spring breeze
holding the warmth of summer on its back.

She thought it funny that we share that love
like we share dark circles under our eyes.
She tells me it's the little things that keep us together.

I'm thinking about how my mother loves to kick mushrooms,
now I send her pictures after sweet rain.

My mother loves potato pancakes
because her mother made them for her.
Now she makes them for me.

My mother loves the color grey,

angels,

the idea that god is in every part of us,

big ceramic plates.

My mother is quiet and soft
because her mother was loud and abrasive.

I am quiet and soft because my mother nurtured me to
be the way that came naturally to me.

When I ask my mother if she's sad, she normally says no, but I know
life tugs at her heart strings the same way that it tugs at mine.

My mother feels the emptiness of a life well-lived.
She fills up unfillable holes.

A moment is

a moment is

a moment.

She says it's the little things that feed an untouchable longing.

I'm afraid of thunder storms because I hate loud noises.

They remind me of men yelling,

drained emotions,

storm drains filling up unfillable earth,

filling up unfillable holes in my unfillable heart.

My mother loves thunderstorms.

They remind her of her mother,

her mother poised in the doorway, bated breath.

PAIGE SZMODIS

To Persephone

You once followed corn field paths,
like me, weaving through
comforting stalks and tugging
at flowering weeds in the soft soil,
until the edge of the world where
spirits rise up from dry ground.
There, where you could not resist
their aching moans, you plucked
a flower and followed their groans and
tasted the pomegranate seeds
to sweeten their heavy souls.

Your mother still cries and corn husks tilt
toward the soil overwatered
with tears. But I forgive you
for carrying the light away
to comfort the dead by trickling
memories through grey river beds.
You and I are still as whole and
bright on the surface as
we are underground.

Don't let them convince you
to be afraid of the dark. Carry your light
like a flower bouquet, like a shield
and hold up your head like corn husks
in early autumn. Love the
pomegranate seeds and use
their juice to smear our stories
onto skin and bones.

Don't let them convince you
you've been abducted when
we walk with free will
wherever we wish—
even beyond the edge
of the Earth.

KIM CORONA

Cabello

Long, dark brown, silky hair that reached just above the hip. It was covered in endless knots that were crying in despair to be released. One by one, hair follicles began to the swallow the wooden floor as the hairbrush ripped them out. This was a daily occurrence and the pain only seemed to get worse. As I continued to get older, the weight of my hair dragged me down. Headaches became routine through the thickness of the Mexican long locks that I inherited. Whenever I saw my reflection through the wooden vanity mirror in my room that my Abuelito built for my Abuelita, I would be drowning in a sea of hair. I found myself resembling the little girl from the *Grudge* movies, dead looking. I hated it, but there was no escaping the hair that established my appearance and meant so much more to my family than it did to me.

To them, it was a symbol of beauty and expectation for women. This concept annoyed me. My mother was raised in Mexico, where the culture is vastly different from the United States. The societal standards for women are different. They have to have long, silky-smooth hair, know how to cook, clean, and most importantly take care of children. Abuelita always told me that men don't want to marry women with short hair, because if they did, they might as well marry a man. As problematic as it sounds coming from someone who was raised to think a certain way, it makes me feel sorry for her and my mother who were forced to believe this.

I didn't want to carry this idea that was embedded in my culture and family. Truly, I never saw the pleasure of having long hair. For the past 15 years that I've been alive, it has always been long, and it was a fucking hassle to take care of. It takes hours for it to dry and it gets in the way in of everything. Just last night my hair accidentally touched the bowl of the salsa verde my mother made for the tacos.

I'm vocal about everything, but no matter how many times I made it clear about having this weight over my head, everyone dismisses my feelings. Any conversations involving hair, I'll never hear the end of it. Just this morning over breakfast, I got into an argument with Abuelita and mom involving the decision of wanting to cut my hair.

"Don't do it. It's so beautiful long. How many times do I have to tell you?" said my mother as she handed the woven basket of fresh tortillas to my father.

"Te vas a ver como un niño. How many times do I have to tell you, boys don't marry girls with short hair!" said Abuelita.

My father chuckled, "That's ridiculous, no she won't. Let the girl do what she wants."

"Yeah, I agree with Dad. She's not going to look like a boy," said my older sister Ana.

"Don't encourage her, Alejandro and Ana," said my mother in a stern tone.

"You see, even Dad and Ana agree. I'm old enough to make my own decisions. Everyone puts their opinions first over mine. I hate my hair. I hate how it makes me look and feel. After all, it is MY hair! I get to decide what I want to do with it!" I rolled my eyes as Abuelita and my mother continued going on with the argument I lost interest in.

"If you keep that up your eyes will stay in the back of your head," said my mother.

"I'm old enough to know that's not true," I said.

"Look, I don't see the point of cutting your hair. It's beautiful the way it is. You know how many girls would love to have your hair?"

"Those girls can have my hair! I don't want it! But you see, this is what I'm talking about. No one takes into consideration about how I feel. I don't care if it's beautiful. I'm just tired of having knots and having to feel like my head's about to come off whenever I brush it," I said raising my voice.

"No le grites a tu madre," said Abuelita.

"Rosa, calm down," said Ana.

"Nobody is yelling at anyone. We shouldn't be having an argument about hair. It's just hair. I'm sick and tired that you guys think it's more, because it's not. It'll grow back, because hair does that, you know!"

"I've had it, Rosa. How many times do I have to repeat myself for you to hear that you're not getting a haircut? End of discussion," said my mother as she began cleaning up the table.

I stormed off from the dining room and into the small bedroom that I shared with my older sister, Ana. I went out to the fire escape from my room to catch some fresh air and relax. This was my favorite place to be. The fire escape overlooked the bodega from across the street next to a newly opened juice and smoothie bar. I heard indistinct chatter from the customers sitting outside drinking their overpriced juice and the traffic that stretched from two blocks ahead. The neighborhood was divided by those who look like me and those who wear mom jeans and awful baseball caps, walking their dogs that probably cost more than my rent. My family lived

in a small two-bedroom apartment in Bedstuy, one of the fastest gentrifying neighborhoods in all of Brooklyn. We've lived here for most of life, and I feared that one day we wouldn't be able to afford it.

Once again, I found myself in tears as they streamed down my brown skin. The mascara and eyeliner I had previously put on began to drip down my face, hitting my white sneakers.

I didn't like how something so small as hair made me this upset. The effect that it had on me was something bigger that no one understood. It's unbelievable that even after I said how it made me feel, it's not enough. It never is. I took off my peacock green colored, cat eye shaped glasses and wiped off the makeup using a small rag with makeup remover. I pulled myself together, took a deep breath and headed back inside. I threw myself onto my bed and proceeded to stare at the ceiling. I heard footsteps approach the door and in came Ana, who sat down at the end of the bed to see how I was doing.

"I could be better. Are they still talking about me out there?" I asked.

"No. Abuelita and mom left not too long ago to go do errands and dad went off to work," she said. "I know at times they can be frustrating to deal with, but they were raised differently than us."

"Don't you think I know that? Every time I say something that has to do with my hair, all hell breaks loose. They act so dramatic."

"Dramatic to you, but not to them. They're probably saying the same thing about you," she said.

Ana was right, but I wanted to do what was for my own best interest. "But it's easy for you to say. You're old enough to do whatever you want."

"That's far from the truth. As long as I'm living under this old worn out Brooklyn apartment with the rest of the family, I go by their rules."

"You know what? That's it! I'm done saying I want to cut my hair. I'm just going to do it." I jumped out of bed and into the bathroom. I searched through the cabinet behind the mirror and grabbed a hold on my father's clippers. Seconds later, Ana showed up behind me.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"I'm taking control. I'm tired of my hair being treated like it's a pot of gold. It doesn't define me!"

"Before you make this rash decision, are you sure about this? Aren't you worried about what Abuelita and mom will say?"

"I'm tired of thinking and worrying. I'm just going to do it. Are you going to stand there or are you going to help me?" I said as I plugged

the clippers into the outlet. I handed her the clippers and looked into her hazel eyes and said, "Do me the honor and shave this shit off my head."

"You must be out of your mind. I have no idea how clippers even work."

"There's a first time for everything. Now hurry up before they come back."

I looked at my reflection through the mirror. This was the last time I would see myself with this hair. The last time I would be unhappy with this hair. Ana turned on the clippers and the buzzing noise began ringing throughout both ears. I looked at her through the mirror and gave her the nod to go.

"Let's pray to God there's no blood and you still have both of your ears," said Ana.

The clippers slowly reached the top of my head and as Ana pulled backwards I felt the sense of liberation as it began to fall off from my scalp. Each time the clippers met my scalp I began to feel more like myself than I ever did before. Tears began to stream down my face.

Ana looked worrisome, "What's wrong? Do you want me to stop?"

"No, keep going."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded my head as I wiped away the tears. Once she continued, the more I saw my brown scalp. Through my reflection, I finally liked what I saw. I looked more alive. The white tiled floor and sink was covered in brown locks. The sound of the clippers stopped as she unplugged it. I felt my head around, I couldn't believe it was all gone. I now had buzzed hair. I could feel the light breeze ever so more that got my body covered in goosebumps. Now, I was able to stand up to family and against what they'd been taught.

Ana let out a sigh of relief, "Wow, that was a lot more hair than I expected."

I laughed.

"But seriously, on a scale of one to ten, how poorly did I do?" Ana asked.

"It's how I wanted it, thank you," I said as tears started to appear again.

"Don't cry, because then I will too. But anytime bud, you look good."

Ana wiped away my tears with her fingers. "Now help me clean up this mess. I can imagine they should be coming home soon."

We rushed to clean up the mess that seemed to never end. Soon enough we heard indistinct chatter coming from outside of the apartment

door. Ana ran to see through the peephole that it was Abuelita and Mom. I quickly threw out every bit of evidence in the trashcan and we rushed into our room. We locked the door behind us and awaited the screaming and fast talking in Spanish to commence.

"Ana and Rosa, come help your Abuelita and I with the groceries," my mother exclaimed.

We both looked at each other in panic, conflicted on what to do.

"Eventually they're going to find out. You can't hide in here forever. Plus, I thought you weren't scared," said Ana.

"That was when they weren't here to stop me." But Ana had a point. Footsteps were approaching the door; the doorknob began to turn, but they couldn't get through.

"*Abre la puerta!* We need help in the kitchen!" said Abuelita.

Ana and I looked at each other again.

"I don't think I can do this. They're going to flip out," I said.

"Don't worry, I got your back. If they threaten to kick you out, I'll sneak you in at night," she said, laughing.

I rolled my eyes and gave her a light punch on her shoulders. I took a deep breath in, unlocked the door and opened it. I looked straight into Abuelita's dark brown eyes, her mouth dropped open as she covered it with both of her hands. She was in disbelief, she started yelling in Spanish through words I never even heard of.

"*Tu pelo, adonde esta?* Why did you do this? It was so beautiful!" she cried in despair.

Ana ran up to her and said, "*Abuelita, calmate.*"

Before I could answer, my mother rushed into the room and also couldn't believe who was standing in front of her. My mother walked towards me, grabbed my head and looked at it as if she was giving me a lice inspection.

"I finally did it," I said.

"Did you use your father's clippers?" my mother asked as she kept staring at my buzzed head.

"Yes, Ana helped me do it. Well what do you think...because staring at it is making me uncomfortable."

"Yeah ma, didn't I do a great job?" Ana asked.

I was waiting for my mother to yell at me, give me this whole speech about how I went against her own word and the culture she grew up with. I even thought of the worst-case scenario where she would disown me and I'd be known as the girl who got kicked out of her home because she shaved her hair off, but all she could say was,

"Ana missed a few spots. After dinner, I'll fix it up for you."

MEGAN SEAR

Lucky Woman

Male emperor penguins keep the eggs warm
while the female penguins leave the colony
to hunt for food.
The female vomits her findings into the mouths
of her little ones.
She gives gives gives
while they take take take.
Then the males travel off, after the hatchings
hatch hatch hatch
and find their own treats.
Isn't it sly how the male emperor penguin
stands by for the easy work?
Once the going gets tough, she steps in
and out of her own maternal box.

Nana used to push her grocery cart through aisles,
leaned into it so she didn't fall slip trip
while her mate sat on the lounge
by the television.
Kicking and limping her way out of the car,
bags in hand, no hand in hand.
She fought and found comfort in
her own maternal box.

An older woman in a waiting room picked up a magazine
covering an article, *The Year of Independent Women!*
She glanced at me and said,
Women have been taking care of themselves for years and
this is the year we finally get credit for it,
lucky us.

Before emperor penguins become monogamous
the males perform dance-like rituals to impress the females,
lucky them.
lucky us
lucky us
lucky us.

MADISON BRADLEY

A Poem for Ghost Children

When you're a ghost
There's not much to do
But slither and moan
On the green floors

And no one can speak
On telephones here
And no one likes
To get out of bed
Or play trumpet
Or slowly sink
On the ceiling

I get lonesome crying
In this paper house
And dying in
The Great Parlor Room
Again and again

There's not much
To do in the Music Room
But break the piano
Teeth and cry when
No one can hear
My creative new spin
On their favorite classic

And the drippy-drip wax
Falls quiet on the wall
In the Big Bedroom
And jumping up is useless
When I float over
The canopy like
Store-bought balloons

Boo is boring
And I've done

Too many murder mystery
Games because I can't
Be both killer and ghost
And when I float through
Walls and slide on top
Of door frames, I wish
I were a vampire instead
I wiggle the waltz
And I flop my sleeves
On the chandelier,
But no one chastises me
Because I'm alone,
Swinging around
On ivy wallpaper

Sometimes I stand at
The top of the stairs
And wait and wait for guests
Who must have received
My custom invitations
For my Birthday Party

Will they like
My Cold Dying Place
And see me reflected
In a pearl mirror
Perhaps I'll dress up
In fancy drapes
And practice ballet
Or experimental dance

Until then, I pray
That the stray cat
Who hisses at me
Will fall gently!
From the Rafters and
Soon follow me around

Until then,
Ghosts don't
Have many friends

(Discounting the
Old Woman who
Sees me in her window
Every night.)

CLARA BAKER

The Science Fair

Cindy opened her eyes to the light streaming in through her window. She looked at the clock and noted that she had a few minutes before Mommy would come in to wake her up for school. She refocused her eyes on the dust that appeared in the sun's rays, and she watched it dance and twirl below her cream-colored ceiling for a few moments. Today was the day. It was the first-grade science fair, and everyone was going to show off their special science experiments. She had watched pink crystals grow for weeks inside of a jar. She sat up with a huge smile, excited to show Mommy that she was already awake and didn't have to be shaken over and over until she was able to open her eyes.

"Hello there, sweet pea," Mommy said as she slowly opened her door. "Look at you, already up." Mommy walked over until she was looking down at Cindy.

Cindy giggled and returned the hug that her Mommy gave her.

"What a grown-up six year old you are!" Mommy said. She began to waddle around the room, picking out the clothes for Cindy to wear to school that day. A pair of pink shorts and a white shirt.

"Okay Cindy, time to get dressed. Up."

Cindy quickly jumped up out of her bed and took off her soft pajamas. "Mommy," she said, "why can't I ever wear my pajamas to school?"

Mommy smiled. "We like to keep our pajamas nice and clean for bedtime. If you wore them to school, you wouldn't be able to wear them to bed! Then they wouldn't be pajamas anymore!"

Cindy bit her lip as she thought about this answer. "How come I don't have pajama socks? How come I can wear these socks to school?" She lifted a foot and wiggled her toes.

Mommy stopped fiddling with Cindy's school clothes and tilted her head up to the sky. She took a deep breath. She didn't say anything for a few moments. If they had been outside, Cindy would have thought she was looking for birds.

"Well, Cindy, socks just aren't as important. It doesn't matter if you wear the same socks to sleep in every night. It doesn't even matter if you wear socks at all." Mommy slowly slipped the white shirt on Cindy.

"But if I want to change my socks, I can? I don't have to wear these to school?" She glanced down at the ones she was wearing, white with navy stripes on them.

"Nope," Mommy replied. "Or you can. I'm going to go make you breakfast while you decide what socks to wear and then go brush your hair." Mommy yawned, stood at her dresser for a few moments, and then walked out the door and down the hall.

Cindy looked long and hard at the socks she wore to bed and decided that they didn't match her pink shorts. She wanted to look especially grown up for the science fair. She thought about what Mommy had said about matching clothes and how sometimes it can be hard to look just right. She walked over to the drawer that held her socks, but she was too short. She stacked a bunch of books on top of each other and stood on them to reach the top drawer. Balancing, she dug through her socks until she found plain white ones that she liked and thought would match her shorts. She realized they were the kind that Mommy always wears. She smiled and put them up to her face. They smelled a little funny, not like Mommy's, and she decided that they had been in her drawer a while. Not Mommy's, but close enough.

Cindy made her way down the hall and into the bathroom wearing her big girl socks. She started feeling a little older. She stepped up on the stool in front of the bathroom sink and looked at herself in the mirror. She brushed her hair for a pretty long time, as she liked the way the brush felt as it ran over her head. She was about to step down and go to the kitchen when a tiny container of something on the sink caught her eye. She figured that whatever it was belonged to her sister, Braelyn, who was a few years older than her and already at school. She picked up the container and opened it and was instantly excited by the many different colors that lay before her. They were colorful rubber bands! But as she looked closer, she realized that they were what her sister often put into her hair to make it stand up in funny directions. Scrunchies. She picked up a pink one and then put it back. She picked up a black one instead. She remembered watching how Braelyn used these and tried gathering up all her hair in the same way. She managed to turn the scrunchie once around her hair before losing grip of it and watching it fall back out. She had to get down off her stool in order to retrieve it, but she remained determined. She had more luck this second time, as the scrunchie stayed in her hair, but she missed a few hairs and the light brown strands fell forward and tickled her face.

"Cindy! Breakfast is ready," she heard Mommy say from the kitchen. Cindy decided to leave her hair as it was.

Cindy entered the brightly lit kitchen and smiled as she saw her bowl of oatmeal sitting at her spot.

"Thanks, Mommy!" She squealed as she got up on her chair and peered into the bowl. Her face fell. "Mommy...where are the berries? You always give me blueberries too!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Cindy, I must have just forgotten...one minute," Mommy said. She walked over the fridge and stood there for a long time. She was gazing inside of it as if she were deciding whether or not to take out some dessert as she sometimes does after dinner. "Oh Cindy...I must have forgotten to get the blueberries at the store yesterday! I'm so sorry, I know they're your favorite."

Cindy looked up at the bright yellow light that was illuminating the kitchen. She felt the small tears poking at the corner of her eyes. "Oh. It's okay," Cindy said. She really wanted it to be okay and tried telling herself that it was, but the knot in her throat didn't budge. Mommy didn't notice her big girl socks or her big girl hair. Yesterday Mommy asked what they were having for dinner after they had already eaten it. Why was Mommy acting so strange lately?

She looked into her oatmeal and began eating the berryless mush.

She was almost done drinking her orange juice when Daddy walked into the kitchen, dressed in his suit and tie and ready to go to his office. He often stays there until late at night, so Cindy treasures every moment she can get with him.

"Daddy!" Cindy cried, and got down off her chair to greet him.

"Hi, honey! How are you this morning?" He kissed the top of her head. "I love your new look!" He tugged on her ponytail. Cindy smiled and looked up at Mommy to see if she would look at her hair now too. Instead, she saw that Mommy was getting one of those big glass bottles down from the cupboard. Cindy noticed Mommy doing this more and more, but she usually only drank out of this bottle during dinner or late at night when Cindy got up from her bed after a nightmare and ran to her parents in the living room.

"Agatha..." her daddy said to Mommy. He briefly looked at Cindy and then back to Mommy. "¿Qué estás haciendo? We talked about this last night."

Cindy perked up when she heard the Spanish. This was Daddy's first language, and she did not know it well. He only used it sometimes when talking to Mommy. Cindy was sure he did this only when he didn't want her to understand. He never tried teaching it to her.

Mommy didn't even look at Daddy as she grabbed an empty plastic water bottle and began putting some of the clear juice from the big bottle into it.

"I'm just trying to take the edge off, David."

Cindy stopped chewing.

"Aren't you hungover from last night?" As he spoke his words got softer and he glanced at Cindy. Cindy had a great time last night. They ate macaroni and cheese that Daddy made while they watched Harry Potter on the big screen TV. She had talked all night about the science fair, and Daddy spent most of the night giving her pointers on how to answer questions people might have. Mommy kept laughing and saying how terrible Daddy is at answering questions. Now, Daddy walked up to Mommy and looked into her eyes.

Mommy took a step back from him, capped the big glass bottle, and took a swallow of what she just poured into her water bottle. "Come on, David. You know I can handle my liquor."

She smiled.

Daddy turned to Cindy. "Sweetie, go brush your teeth for me. Can you do that?"

Cindy nodded, but remained still. She didn't know why Daddy didn't like the glass juice. Maybe Mommy wasn't sharing. Cindy started thinking about her crystals that she grew inside her jar. She was going to show everyone at the fair how she did it! Mommy and Daddy were both going to be there to see. She might even win a prize...

"Honey, please, you're scaring me," Daddy said.

"Relax, David. I took off today, remember? Let me relax."

Mommy shoved past him with her water bottle and walked down the hall. Cindy took another sip of orange juice.

"Daddy, it's okay if Mommy relaxes. Then she'll be all ready to come see my science project!" Cindy said.

"Of course, sweetie." He kissed the top of her head.

Cindy hopped off her stool and travelled down the hall into the bathroom where she brushed her teeth and inspected her new hair in the mirror. When she returned to the hallway, Daddy was there with her backpack and lunchbox.

"Okay, there you go, Cindy," he said as he threaded her arms through the backpack.

"Thanks Daddy! Where's Mommy?" she said.

Mommy emerged from her bedroom with a smile and knelt down in front of Cindy.

"Have a good day, sweetie pie," she said, hugging her.

"See you there, Mommy!" Cindy squealed and clapped her hands together.

Mommy's eyebrows scrunched up on her face.

"For what?"

KARA TRAVIS

Notes Never Passed

Dear Baby Flowerbuds,
Little sister, they asked
for my advice, and
named you Emma, instead.

To my Kindergarten Crush,
When I glued two silvery-star rhinestones
together and proposed to you on the playground,
you could have at least *not* told your mother.

Dear Cheez Whiz,
Oh, processed magic, I admire your cheesy
adhesive powers. My jaws may never separate
from your tacky hold, and it is bliss.

My "Wunderbar,"
You are the only word I remember
in Opa's voice.

Hey Braces,
I was told you are made of
the same material as spaceships, and now
I hate you even more because your cousins
have traveled to the moon and mars,
and I have only been to Florida.

Hello God,
Are you real? Or are you not?
I swear I won't tell—I mean,
swearing is BAD, no swearing.
But like, could you just tell me?

To the First Catcaller,
I want you to know that I'm thirteen and terrified.

Hormones—
Are my shirts shrinking?

How can boys be attractive when they smell
like asparagus and dog breath?
And why am I so hungry?
Get back to me ASAP!

So... High School Small Talk,
Could you stop passive aggressively pretending
that you don't want to gossip? Unless you really do
want to talk about the weather.
In which case, farewell.

To the Person Who Changed the Back of the Penny,
How dare you?
I like the finding the little guy in the memorial!

Dear Pop-pop,
Was the last thing you said to me,
"What are you going to do with your life?"
because you knew that I knew you were leaving this one?

Hellos,
I don't understand how you can still
be harder than goodbyes.

Dear Halle,
Do you remember when we were caught
passing notes about fairies during
third-grade math class?
What were you writing back?

ALBERT HAHN

Rumble

It wasn't until my father threatened to beat me with a chair that I concluded that violence was likely not the answer to my life's problems.

My father and I share a lot in common, despite the fact that I don't want to be like him and internally grimace whenever someone, usually extended family, points out our similarities. We're both stubborn, thorough, and on the stoic side, though for different reasons—his lack of vulnerability is a tool, a way to maintain power, whereas mine is a survival mechanism.

I'm not sure what started this particular fight. We had been sparring all summer, usually for trivial reasons, though the real impetus for our arguments—the rift between us as a result of cultural and spiritual differences—was unspoken but understood. Living with my brother in Pennsylvania, I hadn't seen either of my parents in person for a couple years. They came back from Yanji, China for a summer sabbatical, starting with our graduation ceremonies from college and high school, and left shortly before I started attending Ursinus College. I had become even less like them, partly due to living with my brother. He wasn't there for this event.

I can remember his expression as he stood from his seat at the dinner table, leaving behind a partially full plate of food. I never found out if he went back to it or if he lost his appetite. I wouldn't be surprised if I instigated the conflict, though I know for certain he escalated it from shouting to physical confrontation.

My father, who was normally not physically violent, surprised me by raising his chair above his head and roaring. Instead of running or gaining an advantage by throwing a fork at him or kicking the table into his stomach, I calmly walked around the side of the table and stood face-to-face with him. I could've raised a hand straight up and touched the chair. I was taller than him, and being eighteen and in good health versus his sickly sixty meant that I could've knocked him out without much trouble. But I didn't even clench my fist, something I'd done around him quite a bit. "You can't hit me," I said. Right as I did, I realized that I offered him the perfect set-up.

"Yes, I can." Without skipping a beat, he recited Proverbs 13:24: "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."

I should've seen that coming. I knew what verse he was going to say before it left his mouth, and I knew that he could say at least another dozen on the subject of disciplining children by heart. I can recall my father being less harsh and threatening as a child, as well as less prone to reciting verses to justify his actions. Part of converting to Christianity in his twenties, I suspect, meant that he had a level of insecurity regarding his faith that not only pushed him to be a missionary, but also lose himself in the process of strengthening his faith. Every year, my ability to reason with him lessens, and he becomes more brazen in his emotional attacks on everyone in the family, especially my mother.

For some reason I've been trying to understand ever since the incident, I decided to double down at that point. I'd already made the choice to separate myself from my parents as much as possible, to the point where every other thing I say to them is a lie, and both my brother and I are well accustomed to corroborating each other's dishonesty if it means getting them off our backs. In their minds, I still go to church every Sunday, pay tithe, and believe in the same lies they've been told about gender and race and sexuality. I don't like lying to the people I love, or even omitting things of importance. So it's a good thing I realized I didn't love my parents anymore, and the day I stopped trying to get them to understand who I actually am is among the most freeing experiences I've ever had.

The first time I ever wanted to raise my fists against my father was when I grasped, for the first time, just how much he mistreated my mother. I don't know if he ever hit her; I never tried to find out not just because I wouldn't ever get a real answer from either of them, but also because I feared what I might do to him if I confirmed what I've been dreading for a long time. What he doesn't hide is his verbal abuse, his putting down of my mother any time she has an opinion on anything of consequence. "*Don't say such silly things*" is the phrase I've heard him say the most, and it rings in my ears any time I think about them. The way he says it is envenomed, like something you'd tell a pesky stray, not a spouse.

My father has a Bible verse for everything, and I'm sure that he could provide some form of justification for treating my mother the way he does that makes sense to him. The verse mentioned above is the same one he'd use when I tried to get out of being spanked, back when I couldn't take him in a fight. Studies show that spanking doesn't work—it has the opposite effect of what's usually intended. Kids end up being less obedient, more aggressive, and have lasting mental and emotional side effects. "Obedience" is a big part of parental vocabulary, and that never sat right with me. Maybe I'll be an awful parent—if at all.

During my parents' missionary training, my brother and I went to elementary school classes that were geared towards teaching missionary kids. As a part of our preparations, we had to complete a checklist of vaccinations specific to the region we were heading for. My turn came after lunch. A nurse stuck a shot into my arm and held it there. I had seen her give the previous kid a shot, so I knew that this wasn't standard procedure. She started wiggling the needle around while studying my face. "Does that hurt?"

"No," I lied. I thankfully have a half-decent poker face that was able to back up my words.

"Hmm." She shook it a bit more, a smile creeping across her face. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

She gave off a sigh of disappointment and removed the needle. "Alright, then."

Both this strange nurse and my father cared more about getting a reaction out of me than about what they were ostensibly supposed to do. The spanking was never about discipline and always about humiliation.

I came close to hitting back the first time he used a belt instead of his hands. I thought about wrenching it from him and turning around to push him away, then lash at him until he was the one crying and afraid. I wanted to be the one doing the mocking and goading.

Instead, I took every hit without struggling. I got into fights at church and school, which would only end when some adult or my brother would drag me away from whomever I was wailing on. From a young age, I knew about the ruthlessness of fighting—about the swiftness of effective punches, in contrast to the pointless haymakers depicted on TV that'll only throw you off balance and leave you open to a bigger beating. Real violence is usually quick and dirty, sometimes so fast you don't realize what you've done or what's happened to you until long after it occurs. Fighting was one of the first things I was good at, and the adrenaline rush that comes with that provides a kind of numbness that can be addictive. After a while, people stopped picking on me, which meant that I had to start fights if I wanted to satiate my desire for violence. I wish I could go back and apologize to every boy I hit, especially when I was the one doing the provoking. I would like to be able to undo bruises and scars and let them know that it wasn't their fault.

The first time my father hit me outside of spanking was the least safe I've ever felt. After exercising at a fitness center in Shenyang, we showered, changed, and left the building, gym bags in hand. As we left the building and walked on the platform leading up to its doors, I wrapped my

arms around my dad from behind, like one would when getting a piggyback ride. He spun around and hit me in the back of my neck, dropping me to the ground. It was fast. Brutal. The kind of hit you're looking for when you want to seriously hurt someone. He didn't hit anything too serious, and there wasn't any lasting damage. But the shock of the moment, coupled with the air leaving my body from its impact with the cold concrete, meant that I couldn't stand for a minute. My father started scolding me as I cried, my face still pressed into the ground. "*Don't you ever do that again, you hear me? Huh?*" His voice grew louder and louder. "*Answer me!*"

I gasped for breath. "Do-do what?"

"*You know what you did.*"

I pushed myself off the ground and squatted. I shook my head and checked my body for signs of injury. Some arguing in his defense might claim that he intentionally avoided hitting a nerve so that I would learn my lesson without lasting harm. But he hit me too quickly for that to be the case. "Why did you do that?"

"*You hit me first,*" he replied. It was a phrase that had been directed towards me before, but never by him. And, before this point, it had always been true.

"No, I didn't. I barely even—"

"*Don't lie to me! You hit me just then.*"

The next few minutes were a back and forth where we said the same things over and over, only he grew more irate as he went on, cutting off my ever-shrinking voice. We went home, and I listened as he told my mother that I had "attacked him for no reason" after we finished our regular gym session.

"*Why did you do that?*" she asked me as I sat in my bed.

"I didn't. But don't tell him I said that." I don't know if she believed me, but even if she did, trying to advocate for my side of the story would only end up badly for both of us. "I'm tired, *Mom*. I'm going to sleep."

She looked at me, an uncertain expression on her face. "Ok." My father didn't try to hit me again until the chair incident, though I know from later conversations that he maintained he was in the right about what happened outside the gym.

Armed with a chair and a verse, my father trembled—likely from both his rage and his tiredness from holding the chair for so long.

"Do it, you piece of shit. Hit me. Hit me." I moved closer, feeling the breath from his seething. "HIT ME!"

I don't remember how many times I screamed that phrase in the moment.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked. "Do it. I'm not laying a finger on you. I'll call the cops the minute you touch me."

"I don't care if you call the police."

I hesitated at that statement. His expression was more hateful than I'd ever seen from him, and in that moment, I shook from a sudden chill. "I might die today if I don't stop him," I thought. Many people have praised my father and myself for our restraint and ability to stay cool in heated situations. They don't know what we're capable of when we're angry.

My father kept trying to shake off my mother, who had been hanging onto his arm and pleading him to stop.

"Do it, you cowardly piece of shit." Neither of them flinched at my profanity. We'd gone too far for that to be an issue.

Before I could say, "Just hit me. I know you've wanted to do this for a long time," my mother succeeded in calming him down. He lowered the chair and sat back in it. "Fucking coward," I spat at him before heading to my room. They said nothing.

The summer continued without further conflict. I entered college a pacifist, wishing to change as much about myself as I could in pursuit of becoming a better person—the violence, the sullenness, the fear of change and trying. My brother, who's always been my role model, was never violent and always patient with me. As kids, I'd pick on him or even provoke at times, and he always responded with grace. While I feel embarrassed at how slowly I grew out of my bad habits, he'd never fail to express his pride in me, usually at my lowest moments. My fighting was never something he criticized or glorified, but he was glad to see the habit go.

JOHNNY MYERS

Pescadero

It's Friday, the last day of Spirit Week, and the spirit from the school has been drained. Everyone in your class walks through the halls, sunglasses on, moaning and groaning, dressed in their pajamas. Last night, the first of the official senior year party nights, was devastating. At least half of your class is still sleeping in their warm beds, with their mothers crying into their cheeks, looking over their slumped-over bodies. The other half of the class has been violently woken up, forced to face the industrial school lights, the outdoor sunshine, desperately wanting to shirk away like naked mole rats, back into their holes. You were not at the party last night. You had swim practice.

At least you say you had swim practice, but you ditched halfway through the workout again. You stripped on the pool deck, put on sweats and a hoodie, and hopped into your car. You drove to a nearby cafe, somewhere in a small cafe in Dogpatch, to sit, drink a coffee, and stare out into the bay. This is the third time you've skipped practice this week. You told your coach last time that it was studying for a test, and this time it's writing a paper for a class. The last time you actually wrote a paper was last year.

Are you a bad person? You don't think so. You just think you're a senior in high school who doesn't care much about anything anymore. A waitress comes and delivers your coffee, black. You sit back in your chair and drink, sipping the bay. Way out in the distance, off the Bay Bridge, you see a small splash, and a speedboat bounces on the top of the water.

You try not to contemplate but end up staring out into the crashing waves. It's late in the evening, the streetlights are on, and everything smells like fresh salt. You drink the coffee and drive home.

Friday: Everyone hungover. Again, you're walking around the school halls like a ghost, aimless, goalless. There is nothing to do and no classes to go to. The teachers understand that this week is lost. Out goes the lights and on comes the projectors in every classroom, and a free YouTube Documentary is projected. Your classmates play games on their phone or pass out in their chairs. They hide themselves in their hoods.

You're skipping all these classes because you don't have a very good character. At least, that's what you've concluded: your character isn't developed, it's not strong. That's what your parents have instilled into you. Perhaps you don't have the vivacity of ambition, the glory of

victory. Perhaps you are simply too complacent, too lazy, too unmotivated.

Today only lurches onwards, and you have nowhere to be.

It is an all-school assembly type of day, and you sit with your friend, Alex, near the back. Alex is a kind-hearted and civilized man-child, with paler skin, unkempt greasy brown hair, who had won nationally recognized awards for his discoveries in math. Every day, he sports his crusty old-man jeans and his black, nerd boots, lining his utilitarian pockets with pens and pencils, and worst, his calculator.

The class president goes on and on about how much fun Spirit Week has been and how much the whole deal has meant to him. A short tidbit about the tradition. The seniors win again. The rest. Erupting cheer, the pride and glory of it all.

You elbow Alex and duck out of the assembly. Alex follows suit, and you both are driving to get lunch somewhere off campus.

Strictly prohibited.

You pull up to McDonalds, order a burger, and sit down. Your motions are slow and laggy, almost as if you had a bad cellular connection with the outside world. You sit at the chair and stare at the white and red booths around you, aimlessly, mindlessly. Have you ever been this shut-off from society? Construction workers pile in on their lunch break, anxious moms holding crying children, underpaid balding men in suits and ties, hunched over their burgers as if it were their last meal in prison.

"What's going on tonight," asks Alex, as you stare out the window. You have known Alex for the past few years and know that he is not ready to go to the final party of Spirit Week.

"You know what's going on tonight," you tell him.

"I mean, yeah, but where?"

"I don't know," you say. "Couple rumors going around about Reese's house."

"That's what I heard, too. Are you going?"

"Maybe. I have practice."

"Yeah, right. You're going to skip again?"

You sit with the half-eaten burger in your hand and smile stupidly. "Probably. I should get back in the pool soon, though. Big meet coming up."

"Right."

"Are you planning on going tonight?"

"Yeah, but my mom's out of town, so I don't have a ride."

"I'll drive you. No worries."

Disrespectfully, you eat your whole meal before Alex's order comes through. You sit and wait for him to finish his burger, then you throw all of the recycling and compost into the trash and leave.

After school. A horde of seniors litter the parking lot like traffic. You pull and honk, but it does no good, so you carefully drive around them. Many of them are drinking from paper bags, some of them are smoking something other than cigarettes. In broad daylight, on campus. You leave the parking lot and drive down to Battery Spencer, where you kill the ignition and sit on the hood of your car, overlooking the gate. The sun is warm on your skin and you breathe in the salt. Every fifteen minutes, a new splash and a new speedboat comes rushing through, but you don't focus on the waves, you don't focus on the people, you don't focus on the city. You are in Battery Spencer, on the coast, on the ridge.

Whenever you're caught in traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge, be sure to keep your eyes open, and turn your headlights on. The fog rolls in like a sleeping giant and shrouds the road and the giant red beams around you. Cars jerk forward in traffic jams. The posts are covered with flowers and photographs. An SUV stops in front of you, and you jam your brakes. He is staring out the window, watching the dark ocean rumble, watching the nightboats toss and sway, the speedboats zipping to a small splash on the other side.

You roll down the windows and let the cool night air rush through the car as traffic clears up. The luxury mom-mobile ahead of you starts gaining traction. You know the car, it belongs to one of the girls in your grade. They are playing their music loud enough for you to hear behind them. You do not know where you are going, and you tell Alex to take your phone and call someone in the class, find an address, and pull up directions. He does, and when he hangs up the phone, it only takes a few minutes before he tells you to drive south down to Hillsborough. You know that there are some farm houses south of San Francisco here, where the wealthy isolates go and hide in La Honda or in Half Moon Bay. Hillsborough is for empty wide spaces where lonely people buy mansions in the unkempt grass, the redwood forests, the winding hills, the co-op farms, the once-an-hour restaurants, and government satellites on the golden hills.

Spirit Week parties are a drunken stupor at best and dangerous at their worst. Alcoholic high schoolers whose moms and dads have split offer up their homes for grandiose parties of mayhem and horror. A senior girl whose parents have been divorced for several years now has offered her weekend house to the entire grade to destroy furniture, throw keys, spill drinks and smoke weed out of a one-hitter on the front lawn.

A long drive over the misty mountain highways, past lonely forests of Redwoods and plains, past neon children-crossing signs and permanent construction zones takes you to the environs of long driveway houses and wide open lanes in San Mateo County.

You pull up to one of the driveways and, when you turn off the ignition, Alex turns to you.

"What time are we going?" he asks.

"Whenever you want to. Give me the signal and I'll drive you home."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely," you reassure him. You shut your car door and hear the slam of the rubber against metal. You enter the house party and there is a strobe of lights, a moshing and grinding and jumping and jittering crowd, an ear-killing loudness, sweatshirts and t-shirts, bodies and necklaces, closed eyes and pressed lips, lights flickering on and off again. Plastic cups and Budweiser cans, held high and dripping down the side, the floor coated with a waxy liquor. Two of the bodies push their way into a bedroom, stumbling inside, locking the door behind them. A female fist bangs against the door, begging the two to stop. Four of the boys in the center shake up beer cans and coat the room in foam from their crotch, eyes squinted and shouting. A girl throws up behind the table and laughs to her friend next to her and pulls out her phone.

You notice that Alex has stepped onto the floor, and the mob slowly consumes him like the fog on the bridge. You see Alex start talking to some of the girls, who have tossed their arms around him, and he is maintaining himself calmly. Some of the football players punch him in the shoulder and laugh, and he smiles and punches them back. You see less of his face and more of a plastic cup pressed against his nose. Soon, he is grabbing a beer can and cracking it, pouring the beer out of his crotch and into the mouth of a girl he had just met. She throws up on his shoe, but he keeps going.

You have been in the corner this whole time, arms jittering, stomach juttering. You and your consciously-running mind are uncomfortable here, clawing for a way out of the closing-in room. You have thousands of easy excuses to make as to why you shouldn't be here: this isn't your scene, these aren't your friends. But can you not enjoy yourself with strangers, can you not stay for a little while, can you project a personality? With your eyes to the crowd, watching them smile, bounce, dance, and be young, you have never thought more about how utterly lonely you and your fleshy body are, and you wish to return to the ghost you were.

So you do. You float out the door, open your car, wave good-bye to the red-eyed football players on the front lawn, and hope the best for the girl who you spotted throwing up in the toilet. You try not to think about Alex, how he will get home, how the designated drivers are already drunk and stumbling. You look over and see that Alex left his calculator on the passenger seat. You think to yourself that Alex will call a cab, or something. You end up worrying about Alex, and you end up feeling horrible about yourself.

You do not drive home. You drive south, south, further and further along the southern strip until you pass all the places you have never been before. You heard of people driving down Highway 1, but you have never done the trip yourself. You merge onto Highway 1, which runs along the Western coast of the state, and you start at El Granada. You drive through Half Moon Bay, past surfers and sleepers, tiny houses and traffic lights, small towns and sleepy bays, lighthouses and the endless ocean, through Lobitos, through San Gregorio, until you reach Pescadero, and you pull over. You find a salt-sprayed cluster of homes called Pigeon Point, where you park your car for the night and walk. You cross the highway and walk into the tall, untamed grass, on a trail, through spotless State Parks. It is late at night and you will not make it home tomorrow, but you are surrounded by the turning weaves of grass and the soft back sound of the ocean's deep and full voice. The birds sing above and around you. The fresh wood air, the blonde wheat, the golden hills turning. Strawberries for sale signs, hand painted, on the side of the highway, fresh cherries, fresh blackberries, a million blessings from the vendors, all rising before the dawn. The eternal stories of the Redwoods, the Allium and the Anise, shy deer and curious starfish, the flora and fauna. The early morning breaks from the mountains. You are in Pescadero.

FAITH CARSON

Drop of Grease

Dominoes on a Monday night,
we can hear the hum of Ryan Gosling
from the room next door.
Muffled giggles, which can't be guaranteed
are coming from the droning boob-tube.

Nope, we have grease, and grayish-pink pepperoni.
You take a few sips of that orange soda that
may have expired,
Flat.

Slops of chewing cover
the moaning from next door
like a pizza cutter
slicing again, and again, and
again into the silence.

They turn the volume up,
you check twitter for the thirteenth time.
I think about the drive from the pizza store
where I was too busy looking at your eye twitch
to remind you to turn right.

The check engine light
blinked, blared.
Your voice, drowned out
like usual, when I close my eyes,
Let your raging storm douse me
again.

I do not like the feeling of your hand
moving rapidly, fiercely, across
my face. Raised, red runes
an ancient burial ground.
We used to love each other.

The taste of flat soda lingers,
I touch my cheek,
you ask me about the couple next door
"Are they always so lovey dovey?"

I'm sure they checked the engine
when the light burned.
We used to bubble, fizz.

PAIGE SZMODIS

The Green Iguana

A massive invasive bush sprawled across the corner of my childhood backyard. It peaked out over our high red wooden fence, its green tentacles weaving through the slots in the wood panels and reaching towards the road. The bush was taller than me, an eight-year-old girl—large enough I wished I could fit inside and make my own home under its wide, green umbrella leaves.

It was the perfect place to bury Stormy. Right under its twisted roots in the mystical corner of our backyard.

Stormy was my four-year-old sister's first iguana, a prize from the carnival. Brooke liked tossing the ping-pong balls into the small fish bowls. Three out of five goals would earn you a plastic-bagged goldfish to bring home; lizards were bigger prizes. Except Brooke didn't really win Stormy from the rigged games. My parents were just friends with the owners. They were snatched on for not having a special license for the lizards and had to find them new homes.

Brooke named the iguana Stormy after the early spring thunderstorm that broke out across the sky on the same evening we brought him home.

"What kind of name is that for a lizard?" my twin sister Alexis and I mocked. My parents hushed us as usual, discouraging our constant cynical comments.

Brooke carried on admiring Stormy in his small home in a glass tank on a shelf in our living room. She would stand on her tippy-toes to peer inside and watch him. I never really understood why she loved him so much. You can't cuddle or play with a lizard like a cat or dog. She couldn't even feed him by herself. I know now that the idea of caring for something other than yourself is enough for some people. While Alexis and I were inseparable by nature, Brooke had to find her own companions to care for throughout her childhood.

Stormy lived for four weeks, a record time for a carnival lizard. They rarely live long in captivity. We got a few more after he passed, but they weren't as special. None of them lasted as long, and I don't even remember their names. When Stormy died, Brooke cried for weeks. I thought that she was going to cry for longer than he had been alive. We buried Stormy in a bright yellow Payless children's shoe box with a paper gravestone on top near the bush in the corner of the backyard. Our small

family gathered around the shallow grave to pay our respects, allowing Brooke to say some final words.

Several months later, my family moved to a new house, leaving behind the red wooden fence, the unruly bush, the Payless children's shoe box. Stormy's empty tank still sat on the shelf in the living room when our house went on the market. It was all very sudden. We barely had time to declutter. We ended up shoving our toys and litter from around the house into the storage benches that Dad had just built into the new mud room.

The new owner's family was the first and only one to tour the house. They were a couple around my parents' age, with two twin sons slightly older than me and Alexis and a daughter a year younger than Brooke. The resemblance was striking. My parents didn't even bother waiting around for a better deal on the house. I was confused about why the other family was downsizing to a house that was barely big enough for us five, but they must have had some plans to make the small space work for all of the kids.

My mom would sometimes drive us by the old house in the months following the move. We watched as they built an addition to the side, painted the house beige, and replaced the dull old red fence paint with a classy black. Eventually, we noticed the tangles of the green bush no longer spilling out over the corner of the fence. They had gotten rid of our invasive bush. Mom talked about how good the house looked now and that we should have gotten rid of that bush long ago too, but the backyard would have felt empty.

We laughed together, even Brooke, at the ridiculous image of the new owners finding the Payless children's shoe box with a dead iguana when they dug up the bush. I wondered if they would know the pain that went into making its paper memorial—if they could feel the love of a four-year-old's broken heart.

Years after this history of short-lived carnival iguanas, Brooke was well-prepared for another green lizard named Wanna the Iguana. One of my mom's friends had rescued Wanna from a third-grade classroom, and word had gotten out about Brooke's love for reptiles after her recent adoption of two crescent geckos. So naturally, we took the veteran iguana in.

I was still skeptical about having reptiles as pets, but I had little say in the matter since I was about to move away to college. I only liked the tiny geckos because their sticky toes and tails charmingly curled around my hands when I got to hold them. Wanna, on the other hand, was massive, with a foot long, thick green body and even longer tail. She was clearly traumatized by the third-graders and did not appreciate being

contained to a long but narrow glass tank on the bay windowsill in our dining room.

Every day after school when Brooke fed the iguana pieces of green lettuce and some crickets, she would tentatively lift the lid of the tank while the lizard thrashed around inside. Its tail would whip back and forth, smacking into the glass, but there was nowhere to escape.

Not long after getting the iguana, Brooke learned from its markings that it was actually male, so the name Wanna had to go. We all thought it was a stupid name anyway.

"Sir, excuse me. Sir!" Brooke would say to it as she tried to place its food and water down in the tank without being smacked by its whipping tail. Eventually the name "Sir" just stuck. I supposed it wasn't as bad as Stormy.

Even Dad began feeling bad for the iguana, so he made plans to build a new tank for him. Over the course of the summer, he constructed a stained wooden cabinet with glass on three sides, as high as my chest. The new tank had three stories for Sir to explore, connected by sturdy tree branch ladders. The tank was adorned with a heat lamp and rocks to lounge on. What more could a lizard need? We nestled the tank in the corner of our living room next to the couch. We thought for sure the lizard would lead a happier life there.

Still, every day after school, Brooke would struggle to open the door to feed him without him freaking out, tail thrashing, lunging towards the opening to escape. He succeeded in his liberation plan a few times. Brooke would scream. Dad would come down from his garage in the backyard to help capture him. Alexis and I would wrangle and contain our hyperactive Boxer and block off the doorway of the living room to keep Sir from escaping too far. He had gotten stuck under the couch and leapt onto the TV before, but we'd always manage to corral him back into his mansion in the corner of the living room.

Since he always tried escaping, we thought we would let him out of the cage sometimes to get some space, maybe calm down. We tried a couple times, clearing up the floor of the living room and blocking all crevices and doorways that he would surely scurry to. But with nowhere to escape, he would just end up sitting alert and stressed in the center of the room. Catching him again became not worth the chaos. We eventually gave up on letting him out.

When we first got Sir, I suspected he would warm up to Brooke eventually. Everyone loves narratives about how wild animals start showing signs of love for their captors. Sir never did. Or at least he never showed it. He continued glaring at my mom on the couch from his

lounging position under his heat lamp on the top story of his cage. He continued thrashing his tail whenever Brooke opened the door, and he began crashing into the glass more frequently, startling us with loud bangs.

Brooke never seemed to mind. I would continue coddling her crescent geckos and guinea pig, who—while not exactly affectionate—were at least not antagonistic. Brooke carried on cooing at Sir, saying “excuse me” politely while she fed him dutifully every day, despite the scrapes she got on her hands from his whipping tail. She seemed to accept, in a way the third-graders must not have, that he was an animal. He did not owe us his affection. She accepted his anger, his aggression, his trauma.

After a few years with Sir, I had just gotten home from college on a break when we heard a loud bang on the glass of his cage. Brooke went to investigate as I trailed behind.

“Are you trying to escape again?” Brooke cooed.

“He’s still so angry,” I remarked, astonished about how long this lizard could keep up its attitude.

Sir laid at the bottom of his mansion, his front half gripping onto the tree branch staircase and his bottom half twisted, laying limp.

Brooke called for Dad, who came in from the garage outside, hands still coated in dust from sanding. When he opened the cage door wide, Sir sat more still than he ever had, but his eyes were still wide and darting around the room.

“What happened?” I asked unhelpfully from behind them.

“He must have tried jumping into the glass again,” Dad explained as he went in to gently pick Sir up. “Looks like he fell from the second story and landed on the tree branch on his back. He’s paralyzed.”

“Is he going to be okay?” I questioned, trailing after Dad and Brooke as they took his limp body outside. Mom got home from work just then and joined us, still in her dress clothes. It was not an official or planned ceremony, but there we all were, circled around another green iguana on the patio bricks outside. Sir laid still, but alert. He was only paralyzed in his back half, so his front legs held his head up high.

“What are we going to do?” I wondered out loud, thinking desolately about how the iguana probably did not comprehend why he could not escape, stuck under a circle of its captors.

Brooke just responded with, “Oh no,” and cried softly.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Dad said, standing with his hand on his hips, looking down disappointedly at the limp lizard. “He can’t walk.

He won't be able to get food or water." He knelt down with a sigh, took the lizard's body in his hands, and gently snapped its neck.

Brooke went back inside to her bedroom. Dad carried the green iguana's body to the woods behind the garage. Dense leaves and knotted roots tend to be the best graves for soon forgotten pets. There was no need for final words this time.

Sixteen years old now, Brooke has dealt with the deaths of multiple green iguanas, a tortoise, a gecko, a guinea pig, a rabbit, and our first family dog, but there's nothing quite like the loss at four years old.

ROBIN GOW

dear siri,

if i place my finger over top of a city a thousand
miles away will you tell me how to walk there?
we can flatten mountains with
our thumbs—raise gas stations from
the ground & eat apples in parking lots.
we'll plant the seeds there between
lamp posts.

tell me how to come back
siri—take me home the way we came
so i can see a parking lot full of apple trees—
catch golden delicious on the roof
of my green Volvo with the squeaky breaks &
a trunk full of places we only visit
on google maps.

i'm in the process of
becoming the creases of a map—

a mystic snake crawls on its belly to bite
the cities of our dreams—

siri, can you tell me
what the best way to walk
across the ocean would be?

i'm not going to Paris but i might end up there—
i just want to cross the Atlantic—the
most direct route would be best—

siri, when was the last time
you watched the sun come up?

do you keep track of all the perhaps places
i've ask you to take me?

is this intimate for you

like it is for me?

to know the blue lines i ask you to draw in
the dirt—do you laugh when i miss my turn
& keep driving?

oh siri, let's be strip mall
lovers— drink coffee
from the back seat— let's

just draw lines on top
of lines & trace at
what a journey should
look like—

let's take buses to the moon—
or are you scared we won't get
4G up there?

to the bottom of the Mariana
Trench then?
or somewhere else
impossible as us—

you know i'm not leaving so tell me how to get there—
you know i'm drowning in this room—
in this stop light hymnal—

oh siri do you know what i mean when i say
i want to go home now—i want to go home—

when the ocean is done being blue would you pick me up?
drive the car for me—one hand on the steering wheel
like my father—letting me lay down in the backseat— a little girl
again whose father waits for her to be done guitar
lessons or brushes her hair when she's done swimming lessons—
oh siri be my father for
me— be my mother & show me where the nearest honeysuckle
bush is— i'm thirty & my ankles are covered
in snake bites from all the places i pretended
to travel with you—

oh siri oh siri—
i know where we live on
noble street—
i know the flat of land
where we used to have a house
on main & the brick face of
our old home on franklin
you tell me that home
has an ETA of twelve footsteps—
eight breaths— &
an open window—

SAMUEL ERNST

Black, White, and Grey

This was one stubborn zebra mussel. The thing wouldn't budge, even with an excessive amount of power washing.

At 4 o'clock, Mr. Amels's boat still hung above the water at our docks. He was going to be here in less than half an hour. I could have just bleached the thing and hope he wouldn't notice, but that would be violating the new Invasive Species regulation. I needed the heavy-duty stuff.

I put down my power washing wand. I left my work space, a haphazard wooden dock in a flea-infested corner of the lake, and headed back to the main building. My boss kept the dangerous cleaning supplies in an undisclosed location. The pine needles crunched under my shoes as I went up to the side entrance. We were the smallest, shabbiest boat-cleaning service in Lake Erie, and I wish I could say we were the best. I flung the dirty white door open and turned down the hall to my boss's office.

"No! You betrayed her!"

I push through the creaky office door. Harry's watching Netflix, yelling at his computer again. There's some disgusting slime creature on the screen. It looks like something I cleaned off Mr. Amels' boat this morning. I can hardly hear what the characters are saying over the loud fan.

"Harry?"

"Oh, Colin, come in." Harry does a 180 in his swivel seat.

"I'm already in."

"Even better. You know, Donald Trump's going to be in town next week. He's got a yacht, right? Imagine the money we could rake in if he gets us to do it."

Harry's office could use a good power washing.

"I'm not going to be here next week," I said. "I'm moving to Canada, remember?"

"Canada?" Harry said. "Why're you leaving your ole pal Harry? Please don't tell me you're going to Henry's Boat-Scrubbin'."

"Not at all. There's an art festival across the lake in Port Stanley. Every second Saturday of the month."

"You're coming back, right?" Harry looked at me with sad eyes.

"No, we went over this before. You don't have me on the payroll for next month, do you? I told you, I'm starting a software company there.

Tech startups are big in Canada now. You know Inuit TurboTax? I'm going to do something like that. At least, until my sculpture career takes off."

"Oh well. You kids and your gadgets. This techy craze is all just gimmickry. Fads."

Harry, who was less than ten years older than me, turned the chair around and went back to his Netflix show.

"Goodbye, then, Harry. It's been a pleasure working with you."

I returned to Mr. Amels' boat. I forgot all about the cleaning supplies. Stupid Harry. I kicked the starboard side of the boat. The mussel slid off and plunked into the water.

My mom greeted me when I came home.

"You're home late tonight."

"It's September, Mom. It gets dark out earlier now."

"You're usually home by five-oh-five. It's already five-fifteen."

"Harry Leechy wanted to give me a going-away present before I left."

"And?"

"He couldn't find anything."

"I cleaned your room and packed some of your things up for the move." My mom smiled at me. "Your father would be proud. We always wanted you to go into technology."

"I'm going to pack some more," I said. I started up the stairs.

"Okay," my mom said, "Dinner's almost ready."

My room is dark and nearly empty. Why is it empty?

"Mom?" I said, going back downstairs. "What did you do with *The Natural Harmony*?"

"Is that one of your books?" my mom said. "I didn't see it when I was cleaning your room."

"No, Mom. It's the sculpture. My super-important submission for the Stanley Second Saturday Sculpture Series of September. The one with the tin cans."

"I saw some old cans in the mess in your room," she said. "I threw them out."

"Mom, are you joking?" I asked. "Are you that – I don't even know what to call it."

"It looked like garbage."

"That's the point. Well, part of it. I can't recreate that in one night. The placement, the colors, all the leaves, ugh... it was perfect. Where did you put it?"

"In the recycling. The other things lying around are in the garbage can. They're in the garage." The oven beeped twice. "Have dinner first."

"Let me just salvage the sculpture first." I stormed into the garage. The green bin brimmed with tin cans – soup, vegetables nobody likes, and more. I couldn't believe my mom thought I was eating green beans up in my room. What about those metal birds she must have thrown in the trash? Didn't she notice they were birds? After verifying that I got every can from the recycling bin, I flipped open the garbage can. There were two white bags tied up, one on top of the other. Whichever one I picked first, I knew would be the wrong one.

I was wrong about that too. Mom had deemed it necessary to divide up the sculpture and evenly distribute it among the Pop-Tart wrappers, banana peels, and cigarette boxes in both bags. There were two mangled cans of Coke Zero. One had been an egg shell in *The Natural Harmony*, but I couldn't tell which. I threw them both on the concrete garage floor. There was no point. I'd have to wait to submit it the second Saturday of October. Even then, I'd never have the same precise details, or the same free, calculated flight paths of the artificial birds. How could I bend the mangled tubing back into the sturdy tree? It was just garbage now, and not even intentional garbage.

"Colin?" my mom opened the garage door. "Dinner's ready, and don't forget to pick up all the garbage you just spilled. Just because you're leaving tomorrow doesn't mean you can leave this place a dump."

"Give me a second, Mom."

"I gave you a second. Come on, it's going to get cold."

"I'll be right there."

The broken sculpture did look like garbage strewn across the floor. Maybe some miracle would happen. Maybe I could just look at it from a different perspective, and realize it's a better sculpture in pieces, like those 'deconstructed' dishes they always make on the Food Network. Maybe my Fairy Godmother will show up, or Harry, with an invitation to a Wizard School where sculptures assemble themselves. If all else failed, I could win a prize with the Glencoe Garbage Group.

None of those things ever materialized, and by 7 o'clock the next morning I was alone driving my dad's old '87 Accord on the road to Port Stanley. Aside from the usual delays by Buffalo and the border at Niagara Falls, the traffic was light. Only ten cars and a Mack truck honked at me, and I'm pretty sure it was their fault.

Port Stanley exuded quaint charm. It was the cutest of all the cute lakeside towns in Canada. The downtown square had gift shops with big, clean windows, and a boxy little lighthouse guarded the beach. The waters

of Lake Erie looked even more pleasant than at home. They were starting a ferry across the lake, not that I would ever need to go home.

I quickly settled in to my boxy, barebones apartment. My college dorm might have been bigger. Before unpacking anything, I continued reconstructing the sculpture. *The Natural Harmony 2.0* looked almost presentable when I heard my phone buzz. It was Harry: "Mr. Amels called. Said the boat was the best he's ever seen. Said a place in Jersey used the jacuzzi on it while they had it. He drove by and saw them in it. LOL."

Then, another text: "Good luck up there. Stay away from Henry's. I'm sure you'll do great with your baking thing. I believe in you, pal."

I almost missed Harry. He and everybody else I knew were nice people but didn't understand sculpture. My 10th grade friend, Neil, once tried to compliment a sculpture I made by saying the colors reminded him of the Pittsburgh Penguins, mixed with his Grandma's favorite hat. Only one other person in my high school was a sculptor, and she moved to some small college in the southeast part of the state – the farthest from Erie you can get without leaving Pennsylvania.

An intimidating line spilled out of Kettle Creek Park, behind two white tents. I didn't know this many people even knew about such a small town. An older man in faded clothes with a beige baseball cap got into line behind me.

"Are you new here?" he said.

"Yes"

"I thought so. These lines get longer and longer ever year." He extended his hand. "I'm Joe. Joe the Grey."

I shook his hand. "Great to meet you. Uh, why do they call you Joe the Grey?"

"They don't call me Joe the Gray," Joe said, shaking his head. "I call myself that. Three reasons. I'm half white, half black. Secondly, my morality is grey. That's my shtick, so to speak. My sculptures are all about how grey everything is. I'll show you my latest entry after I get it set up. That is, if we ever get out of this line. Anyway, the piece is two lines. They start vertical, and parallel, but they zig and zag and loop just to end up vertical and parallel again at the top. The one starts purple and turns blue. The other starts red and turns purple. You follow?"

"I think so."

"What about you?" Joe said. "What kind of sculpture are you entering?"

"It's a thing," I said. "It has birds and it's made of tin cans and stuff."

"I'm sure it's great," Joe said. "Young people at these events are always into those can things."

Did other people make sculptures out of cans?

"What's the third reason?"

"What?" Joe frowned.

"The third reason you call yourself 'Joe the Grey.'"

"Well, I'm half white..."

"No, the other reason."

"Oh," Joe said. The line inched ahead. "Ever read *Lord of the Rings*?"

"I've only seen the movies."

"Ok, well you should know about Gandalf. Gandalf the *grey*."

That's who I see myself as. You understand? I want to take someone on a journey. Those little guys, they saw the world. One day, this guy in a funny hat—" he points to his own Ontario Fishermen's Association hat. "- just knocks on their door and sends them on an adventure. He endangers their lives along the way, but hey, that's life."

"Did you ever have a protégé? An apprentice in sculpture?"

"No."

We stepped forward again.

"And I never had any kids," Joe said. He kept silent for the rest of the time.

After registering, I carried my sculpture from my car to the grassy area reserved for the festival. I put up *The Natural Harmony 2.0* near the parking lot. The metal tree looked even more impressive with real trees in the distance. I caught Joe setting up his sculpture by the river later.

"Look at how tall that thing is," A woman with a dog said, her hand on her forehead blocking the afternoon sun. "How does it stay up?"

"It took me months to find something sturdy enough," Joe said. "I planned on displaying it last month, but I didn't want to risk it falling over with the winds."

"That's impressive," I told him.

"Yeah," he slapped the side of the sculpture like a dealer showing a used-car. "In the end, it's still just two bent lines, though."

"Is this your sculpture?" she asked me.

"No," I motioned to Joe. "It's his."

She grabbed his hand and yanked it up and down. "Sir, I just wanted to tell you how much this sculpture speaks to me."

"Well, thank you," Joe said.

"I work for the Ministry of Transportation, and I think this piece has an amazing message about our country. With any obstacles, any

detours, any vehicle, the important thing is that we get there. It's nearly brought me to tears. I'll give you \$20 for it."

"Joe, it looks like it's-" I said. The sculpture leaned over and fell inches away from the transportation lady's head. She jumped and released her dog's leash. The dog ran across the field.

A man drove by in a golf cart. "Fifteen minutes until opening," he said into a megaphone. "All sculptures must be up. Woah, there." He swerved around the dog and rammed into *The Natural Harmony 2.0*. The entire thing fell into shards. The driver turned the cart around and stopped it. Blood dripped down his wrinkly face.

"Oh no," the transportation lady said.

"Whose was that?" Joe said.

I didn't answer. I ran over to the pile of garbage. A guy with a black pointy beard already ran over with an ice pack. I fumbled with the broken parts scattered on the grass.

"I'm alright," the golf cart driver said, leaning one hand on the wheel and pressing the ice pack against his head with the other. "It's just an accident. I feel worse for the poor fella whose sculpture I knocked over."

Some of the leaves had fallen behind the golf cart, and I went back to find them.

"Don't feel bad about that," the pointy beard guy told the driver. "It wasn't winning any prizes or anything. Look at the title - *The Natural Harmony 2.0*? That just sounds stupid. Why the 2.0? This isn't computer software. What's *The Natural Harmony* supposed to mean? Sounds like a cliché."

"That dog really came out of nowhere," the driver said. "These dog people are getting out of hand. They never clean up after themselves either. The whole park smells like garbage."

"It looks like garbage too," the beard guy said, looking down at my sculpture. "These kids are ruining the Stanley sculpture scene. This thing looks like a 3rd grade Arts and Crafts project. The Campbell's Soup Cans are the worst part. It's like they just learned about Andy Warhol in art class and now they think they can be some master artist like him."

"Is everybody here alright?" Joe said, walking over to the scene.

"I'm okay," the driver said. "We've just got a little mess to clean up. Hope the golf cart's okay."

"I have to go now," the bearded guy who had no respect for actual artists who might be within earshot said, "I have some to make some finishing touches on my piece."

"Are you alright?" Joe said to the driver. "You might have a concussion." He picked up the megaphone. "Does anyone here know how to perform a concussion test?"

"Have any of you seen Mikhailovich?" the transportation lady asked.

"What?" I said. I was trying to get a metal bird to fit inside the Coke nest.

"My pride and joy, Mikhailovich," she said. "I let go of his leash when that horrid sculpture almost fell on me. The poor boy ran off frightened."

"He ran past my golf cart," the driver said. He waved his finger toward the river. "He went about that-away."

"Oh no, he's going to drink the dirty creek water," the transportation lady said. "He's only allowed to drink Fiji Water. He'll get diseases." She hurried away. "What if someone dropped a chocolate bar on the ground? He could die."

"Can you see how many fingers I'm holding up?" Joe said, looking like he wanted a high-five from the golf cart driver.

"Five," the driver said. "Five blurry fingers, right there in black and white."

The bird would not stay in the can. I threw them both on the ground.

"Can you spell your name backwards?" Joe asked the driver. I stood up and marched away.

"I can't even do that without a concussion," the driver said.

"Well, just stay here," Joe told the driver. "I have to call Henry's and tell them I'll be late picking up my boat. Holler at me if you need something."

On my way out of the park, I passed a group of people in suits. They looked like politicians or CEOs. They were all huddled around something on the ground. The beardy guy who hated my sculpture was there too.

They were gathered around the guy's sculpture. It was a red pen.

Do grown men cry? I sure did, especially that night. I had a great dream though.

In the dream, I had my morning Tim Hortons and opened Twitter like I usually did. The Port Stanley mayor tweeted the winning sculpture for this Saturday. It was mine. The sculpture in pieces on the ground ended up being better than the original thing. The tweet got thousands of likes, more than the population of Port Stanley. Samuel Jackson retweeted it. Dostoevsky himself started following me. Mikhailovich the dog ate the

red pen sculpture and died. Not that it was any competition for me anyway. I was famous. I didn't need a tech company anymore. I didn't need mom, or anybody ever again.

I woke up in my little apartment bedroom the next morning. I had a text from Harry at 1 AM: "Just finished that Netflix show about the boy whose nose bleeds. Oh, and get this – Mrs. Nickelshare's bringing her boat back from Lake George. The thing must be filthy. Hope you're having a great life."

I put down my phone, rolled over, and tried to go back to sleep.

VALERIE OSBORNE

Mice

I found a mouse in the hood of the stove top.
A blizzard rocked the power lines and stopped the
grumbles of cockcrow traffic and his mouse-cry woke me up
from the spectral February silence hovering outside my window.
He was crying because he was tired of living in the dark and
underneath stove tops and of being a mouse.

"Being a mouse is a tragedy," he squeaked, and howled, and screamed
me out from my sleep. I found him in the hood of the stove top.
Red numbers blinking over the microwave.
Our eyes were magnets, opposite poles
clawing at each other.

His fear was a machine, pulsing through a thin, cinereal coat.

I didn't want to be a mouse either.
Our eyes shook, two animals lost in their own skin.
I woke my dad up from a sheet tangled hibernation and
the frozen kitchen floor punctured the soles of our feet.
He lifted the stove top. Pulled the mouse from its
trap and threw it out in the snow.
Hiding from the dawn in the shade of my unlit room,
I cried, shivering beneath a blanket
and three feet of snow.

JULIAN BAROCAS

Bust



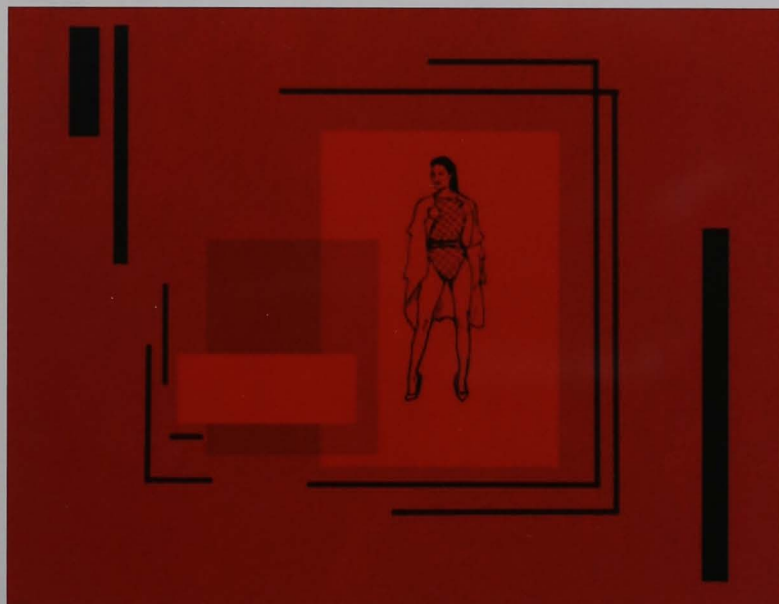
BRANDON CAREY

Kyoto



SARAH DEFELICE

Identity



MILLIE DRURY

Sunflower



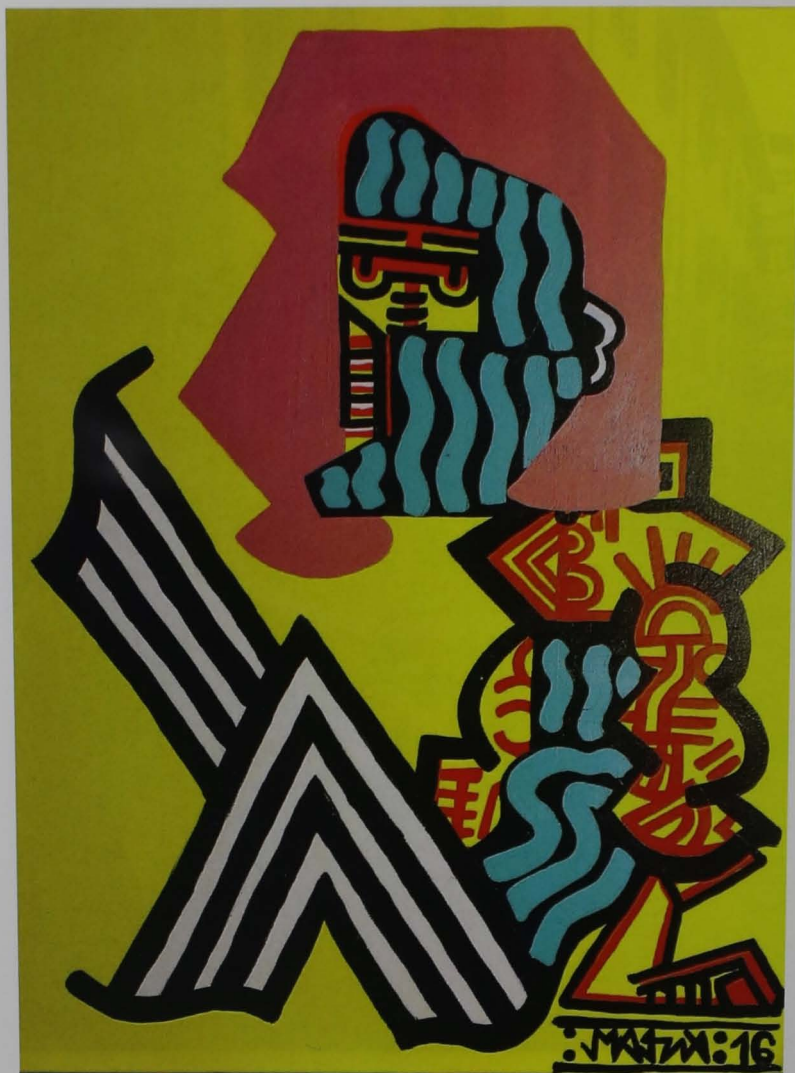
OLIVIA GLOVER

Tornabuoni Bubbles



MARIO HEITMAN

Olympia



ROBERT VARNEY

Decayed Hall



ROBERT VARNEY

Perspective



MADISON BRADLEY

a poem for lost boys

the boy's hair is soil
and autumn fallen
on the bathroom floor,

he un-hides beside
the mirror with green
garden shears, his smile
is a flute,

bell holds the moon loose
like an iphone light
while peter pan chops
off his hair,

they both laugh and change
clothes and feel like they
can float on dust.

MILLIE DRURY

Lucky Daddy

I never carry my emotions on the surface.

Bubbling just below I carry feelings and memories like a curling river. The bends and turns change in a heartbeat from rapid and boiling to calm and glassy, a pool reflecting sunlight that bounces blindingly off the surface. Sometimes I feel that way about my dad. The way we interact constantly changes from good to bad to worse to better to okay to silence.

When I was little, he told me and Arthur to call him Lucky Daddy. He'd worked in the North Tower of the World Trade Center and happened to be in a meeting across town on September 11, 2001. He told us that the two friends sitting next to him had died. My mom was almost seven months pregnant with my brother at the time, belly swollen on her agonizing commute into Queens every day, and I was two months away from my second birthday at Mrs. Ganges' house, tottering around unsteadily on chubby toddler legs. When my dad told me that story, I felt proud that he had survived.

Other times, I wished he had died during the September 11th attack. When he yelled at my mom, or called her a bitch, or screamed at Arthur so loudly the neighbors turned on their lights at two in the morning, the tiny squares of light illuminating the lawn below, or refused to comply with my mom's request for a divorce, or ignored my brother shrieking and howling and pounding his fists on the door to let him out of his room, or dragged me down the hallway by my elbow to a timeout, or said I was just like my mother as if I was a dead bug smeared on the bottom of his shoe.

In my room late at night, when everyone else had gone to sleep, I wished him dead. I sat at the foot of my bed, a tiny pastel checkered blanket wrapped around my shivering shoulders, and I wished that my dad had died on September 11, 2001, just so I would never have known him. If he had died, I could just think of him as a hero. I could never think badly of him. He wouldn't be Lucky Daddy, he'd be Dead Daddy, but I wouldn't hate him.

Not all memories are bad though. Sometimes I think about when he would take me driving illegally at age fifteen on a narrow dirt road lined with rocks that pinged against the bottom of the car, or when he tried to convince the flight attendant that I needed to sit in a car seat on the plane to Nevada when I was four, and when he held my hand across the aisle the whole trip home because we were in separate seats, or when we

watched the sun rise together on the wrap-around porch, the light glinting off the dew-covered lawn, wearing three sweaters each to keep warm. I remember things like my mom making fun of his blue-striped pajama pants, ripped off at the bottom with strings dangling down, and he called them pirate pants; or playing library and using the brand new library card I had received for my sixth birthday, checking out books about Abraham Lincoln and complex philosophy; or when we had such an intense water balloon fight I broke his sunglasses; or when he got so excited for my first communion that he re-landscaped our lawn and re-decorated the house.

I carry the good moments with me more than the bad. They stand out in my mind until the bad memories slip away, blurring together, sometimes forgotten but always there. The good memories don't fade. They stay sharp and focused, waiting like a photo album for me to slowly look through when I'm feeling nostalgic.

Jingling alongside my car keys, I carry around a Hogwarts crest keychain. My dad gave it to me last Christmas, early in the morning as we sat on opposite red couches in my mom's living room.

"To put your new house key on," he smiled.

He was moving out soon. My mom had filed for divorce that past June.

My mom called him a selfish asshole. She would tell me he didn't think about anybody but himself. She was right in some ways. But in other ways, I knew he did the best he could.

He's the kind of person who gets excited about new Latin books to read and was giddy the first time we watched *Gone with the Wind* together, even though I sat frozen in horror. He even tries to be upbeat and positive about moving out of the house he's lived in for thirteen years.

He takes my dog Samson on long walks through the woods, patting his dark brown head with the floppy soft ears. Before we got Samson, he would walk by himself, bringing a book or his hefty black binoculars to look at birds, sometimes toting me and Arthur along behind him in a clunky red wagon.

Now Samson sleeps next to my dad on the floor of the master bedroom in his multi-family home barely five minutes from my mom's house. It's attached to three other units and has mirrors for walls, but has a big deck and lots of skylights, so he invariably tries to overlook all the smaller things.

He's the kind of person who will take a trip out to my grandfather's Christmas tree farm near Binghamton just to pick up an old Adirondack style couch he left there before he even moved to Albany with

my mom. After I hurt myself falling on it twice as a toddler, my mom made him get rid of it.

Sometimes he quotes Latin texts and explains their meaning and origin to me, just to have something to say. His face lights up when he asks if we can watch an episode of *Friends* together whenever I stay at his house. When we sit on the new couches he's so proud of, I always peek over to see if he's laughing. When he does, he doesn't look sad or angry anymore. The fifty-six year old in front of me suddenly turns back into the forty-six year old who took me to the pool after work during the summer, and played rocketship countdown on the swings at the playground and held up his fingers, signing "I love you" when I left to get on the bus in elementary school, and wasn't depressed or annoyed or someone I couldn't talk to. He suddenly becomes dad again, and nothing else he's ever done matters.

MYA FLOOD

Nightmares and Dreams Induced by my Mother

This is a list that haunts me when I sleep
When my eyes roll to the back of my head
When I stare off and twist my rings and smile
Lids flicker cinematic visions
12 nightmares and dreams
Induced by my mother

1

Sitting in cloudy couch with a screaming infant
A stranger asks me "is he yours?"
I am forced to say yes
It's funny planning a baby shower at 19
Thank god I am not due anytime soon

2

Empty foil panning for liquid gold
Sifting through paper soot and grime
Lost pasta in its prime
Looking for the recipe box
I never got around to making
Perpetually piecing together
Missing comfort food codes

3

Forgetting how to change a tire
Forgetting how to sew a half stich
Guitar chords
Forgetting how to sing
Full lunged
Forget all plucked strumming strings
Fuck

Forgetting the lighter
In my left jean pocket

4

Having a child that is a Gemini
Leo
Or Cancer
I noticed that they are the most accident prone
Restless, reckless

No room for error

5

We are in a car driving nowhere

Fingernails scraping at broken glass

I lost the directions

I am still en route

6

Marrying the slave master's son

Death march

Ironing his dress shirts with static starch

I can't jolt awake

I need to wake up

I do

7

My mom told me her favorite color was brown

Brown

Raisinettes on wooden tables

Brown like a strong tree

Tall tree

Brown like my hair the most

No my

Almond eyes

No

Brown like my skin

Like

My skin?

It wasn't brown

I caught her red handed

8

At my spinster wedding I am the bell of the ball

Everyone is dressed in white

I fulfill the family prophecy

A strong woman

Without a king

My mother wears black in mourning

9

Missing family phone calls

And never being able to say goodbye

I love you

Or thank you

10

You know when my mom asked me
how I would raise my children
I said to myself
I don't think I can bring something so brown
And burdened into this world
I close my eyes
hold her wailing cheeks
her brown sugar buttery cheeks

11

Her hunger
Her pain
Will be mistaken for "angry"
Wild

I watch my baby get objectified, shot and shuck
I wake up in tears

12

My children will learn to listen
Speak and mean it when they
Whisper a promise
Polite and fierce
Big eyes
Wide open when they sleep
Like spastic horror flick
The whites of eyes scaring all that
Witness their intuitive visions
Futures
Dreaming as their mother does
And her mother before her

KARA TRAVIS

Topple

I don't trust monkey bars.
I teeter totter over to tic-tac-toe
for one because I need to be dizzy
with thirst and drunk on hopscotch
before I'll consider foursquare.
Tag has too many rules and I'd rather
sit on the mood swings for the rest of recess
if you're going to be that way and claim
base is the other picnic table. I
am never safe. No, I won't hold your jump
rope. I'm too busy digging in the sand
box of my head. I have a castle to
finish. I am building walls.

My parents are the worst parents in the world and here is why:
They will not get a divorce.

This is unfair because I am like the only one in my fourth grade class who does not have divorced parents. If you have divorced parents, you get double the Christmas presents and double the birthday presents. If you have divorced parents, you don't have to go to church or Sunday school because you get to be with your dad on the weekends and your dad doesn't make you go to church.

The only other person without divorced parents is Freddy Knot. And Chris Waterson but his parents are dead, so that doesn't count.

My best friend Lily's parents got divorced three months ago and now my other best friend Katie's parents are divorcing. I am so jealous. We are all sitting outside for recess and watching the fifth grade boys play basketball.

Right now, Katie is saying to me, "I wonder if my mom is going to get a boyfriend. If she does, I hope he is rich."

"How are your parents, Sandy?" Lily asks me.

"What do you mean?" I say.

"Aren't they like... together?" Lily says.

Katie snickers.

My stomach is bubbling. I want to punch Lily right in her stupid, stupid face. "Yeah."

"You are like the only one in the fourth grade who does not have divorced parents," Katie says to me. "That is like so sad."

"If my parents were not divorced, I would probably, like, just die. I would be so embarrassed," Lily tells me. "I do not know how you do it. You are so brave, Sandy."

I roll my eyes. "Shut up, Lily. My parents could be getting divorced for all you know, so why don't you shut your ugly stupid mouth."

Lily scoffs. "God, I think your parents staying together is making you weird." She gets up and Katie does also. "Let's go, Katie," she says. "Let's talk somewhere else. Sandy just does not understand what it is like to have divorced parents."

I am so mad, I just want to scream. But I do not. Instead I just get up and walk in the opposite direction. If I stay sitting on the curb by myself, everyone will think I am a loser. If my parents would just divorce,

I would not be having this problem. If my parents would just divorce, I would not be walking around recess by myself. I would get to be in the secret Kids of Divorced Parents Club like everyone else.

When I am halfway through my second lap around the basketball court, I see Freddy Knot crawling into the bushes. He is so so gross. He sees me staring and says, "What are you looking at?"

"Why are you crawling in the bushes?" I cross my arms over my Tinkerbell shirt.

"Because," Freddy says. I expect him to say more, but he does not.

"Cuz why?"

"Cuz I am forming my own club," he tells me. "A club for kids whose parents are not divorced."

"You're gonna be the only one in that club," I say. I hope no one is watching me talk to gross Freddy. Freddy, who still wears light-up Sketchers and always smells like piss. Freddy, with the spiky hair and who always has red Gatorade staining his mouth.

"Nuh-uh," Freddy says. "You're in the club too. Your parents are still together."

"Well," I say. I am trying to think of what to tell him. "They could divorce so I don't want to join your club."

This is not good enough for Freddy. "You can't say that," he tells me. "Just face it. You're in the club."

"You can't just tell me when I'm in a club!" I tell him. "I don't have to join your stupid club if I don't wanna. It's dumb of you to even make a club. Your parents could divorce too."

"They're never gonna," Freddy tells me.

"You don't know that," I say.

"Yeah I do."

"Nuh-uh."

"Yes," he says.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Cuz my mom is real sick, and my dad takes care of her. So he can't leave her even if he really wanted to," Freddy says.

I feel like someone just threw a basketball at my gut.

I say, "Oh." I say, "I'm sorry." I say, "I hope your mom feels better."

"She's never gonna get better but that's okay." Freddy shoves his fist in his pockets.

"How do you know that?"

"Cuz she has a brain tumor or something and she can't eat by herself and she wears diapers and stuff," Freddy tells me. "Sometimes I have to help my dad give her a bath. My dad says she's like a vegetable."

That is so gross, I think to myself. I try to imagine Freddy and his gross dad giving his mom a bath in a bathtub in a bathroom. They live in a trailer park.

"Do you wanna meet my mom?" Freddy asks me.

"When?" I ask.

"Today. After school," he says. "She doesn't recognize me all the time, but sometimes she does. She'll be happy if I bring someone over, I think."

I don't respond.

"She's gonna be dead soon," Freddy says.

I turn around. The fifth graders are still playing basketball. The rest of our fourth grade class—including Lily and Katie—are all standing in a circle playing some game that involves slapping their hands around the circle. Everyone except for Chris. Chris is burning the ants on the ground with a magnifying glass. I guess that's what happens when you have dead parents.

I turn around. "I guess," I say. I feel like I have to meet Freddy's mom now because I sorta made him feel all bad about it. "But do not tell anyone in our class that I am coming over."

"Why not?" Freddy asks.

"Cuz you're gross."

He shrugs. "Fair enough, I guess."

I follow Freddy to his house after school. Or, trailer, I guess I should say. It is a pretty far walk, and whenever he steps on a rock or bump, his sneakers light up.

We step on a lot of rocks.

"When did your mom get sick?" I ask him.

"Um," Freddy says, "a year ago or something. It just got worse."

We step on broken glass and his sneakers light up.

"When's she gonna die?" I ask.

"Maybe next month. I dunno. My dad's tired of paying her medical bills."

We approach a trailer, and he presses all his weight against the door, turns the knob, and practically falls in. I am still outside the door, but I can hear the game show someone is watching blasting on the TV.

"Mom, I'm home!" Freddy says.

I step in after him and look around. My eyes land on a green moth-eaten arm chair where a woman, naked except for a diaper, is sitting. Naked. Completely naked. Her breasts sag and her skin looks gray. Her head is shaved and there is a long scar, puckered like a zipper, snaking across her scalp. Her hands are shaking, and she is kicking her feet and laughing like a child. She reeks of piss.

"Who is that?" I blurt, pointing to the naked baby woman.

"That is my mom," Freddy tells me. "Say hi."

I look at the baby woman. She starts sucking on her thumb. A line of thick drool slides down her chin, down her chest, and settles in her navel. There's a scar on her abdomen. It looks like the scar I got when I got my appendix out last winter.

"Hi Freddy's mom," I say. I wave.

"Mom," Freddy says loudly. "This is Sandy. She's my friend from school."

"Yeah," I say. "I'm Sandy. But we're not friends." I know that is probably mean of me to say but I can't bear the idea of anyone thinking that I would willingly hang out with Freddy. Even if that "anyone" is Freddy's mother.

"I need to watch my show," Baby Woman says suddenly. Her voice sounds like applesauce, all curved edges and fluid. If this was a movie, there would be subtitles when she speaks.

On the TV, someone just answered a question correctly, and they jump up and down. Baby Woman claps and the extra skin hanging on her arm shakes.

"Let's go to my room," Freddy says.

"You have a room?"

"Yeah," he says. "I share it with my dad. Mom sleeps on the couch." He opens a door. There are clothes everywhere, I can't even see the floor. Piles and piles and piles of clothes. All the clothes look gross and gray and covered in lint and spaghetti sauce stains. And there's a waterbed with a white sheet thrown over it. There's a *Thundercats* poster on the wall. The room smells like piss.

We both sit on the waterbed. It sags.

"Do you wanna watch TV?" he asks. I don't answer, but he flips on the TV anyway. It's old and cracked and small. He puts on Nickelodeon. *Tak and the Power of Juju* is on. I never liked this show, but I don't say anything. The color is all faded. He hits the side of the TV again and again and it clicks and whirs and hums.

Freddy licks his lips. "Do you have a boyfriend, Sandy?"

"No," I say. I am staring at a half-empty jar of tomato sauce that is laying on a pile of clothes. The jar looks moldy, and there are a bunch of flies swarming around it.

"So that means you can kiss me," he says.

"What?" I ask.

"You can kiss me," Freddy repeats. "Because you don't have a boyfriend."

"That's not how it works," I tell him.

"It sorta is," he says. "Can you kiss me?"

"No."

"Can I kiss you?"

"What's the difference?" I say. "No."

"Why not?" he asks.

"Cuz you're gross," I say.

"Then why did you come over my house?" he asks.

"This isn't even a house."

"Sandy."

"I only came over to see your retarded mom," I tell him.

"She's not retarded."

"Yes she is."

"No she's not."

"Whatever," I say.

"You have to kiss me now," Freddy tells me.

"Why?"

"Cuz you called my mom retarded," he says. "She's dying, and you called her retarded, so you need to kiss me." He licks his lips. He has a red ring of Gatorade around his mouth.

I think about what he said. "Fine," I say. "I am going to close my eyes, but you can only do it for a second. And don't tell anyone. You're gross."

"My parents don't kiss anymore," Freddy says.

I shut my eyes and wait.

"My parents don't kiss anymore," he repeats.

There is a silence, and my eyes are still closed. I feel like I have been waiting for a million hours. I am about to ask him if he is gonna do it already, when I feel something gross and cold and wet against my mouth. I feel like someone is pressing a fish against my mouth. I open my eyes and I see Freddy's eyes way too close to mine.

I pull away and wipe my mouth.

"Can I put my tongue in your mouth?" he asks.

"What? Ew. No. Gross. I did not even want to kiss you."

"My mom is dying," he says. He looks sad.

"Fine," I say. "I am going to close my eyes again."

"Okay."

"And you can't tell anyone."

"Okay."

I feel his fish mouth again and then his lips part and I feel his cold pointy tongue try to get into my mouth. I let it. It feels so weird and I wonder why people even enjoy this. His tongue tastes like Gatorade and spit. He keeps going, and I do not pull away this time. I do not know why.

Then the bedroom door opens, and I break away. There is a fat red-faced man standing there. "Freddy," he says. His teeth are the color of a parking lot. His thin white shirt has a giant spaghetti sauce stain on it. He is so fat, and his shirt is so thin I can see all the doughy rolls of his gut.

The man does not say anything about Freddy's tongue being in my mouth.

"Dad, I am with someone," Freddy says.

Freddy's dad's eyes slide over to me. He gives a creepy grin, and my mouth starts to taste like pennies. "I do not care," he tells him. "I won't be home tonight. You're going to have to give your mom a bath by yourself." His voice sounds like dark glass.

I try not to look at the man. I look around. There is a small closet and the door is cracked open. I stare at it.

"Why can't we just do it together tomorrow," Freddy tries.

The closet is full of tomato sauce. Jars and jars of grocery store-brand tomato sauce. The generic kind.

"She smells like shit," Freddy's dad says.

I imagine Freddy and his dad eating tomato sauce right out of the jar with dirty spoons.

"But Dad—"

"Freddy, she's gonna be dead soon anyway. You will not have to do it much longer," he says. "Give her a bath." And to me, he says, "Nice to meet you." He slams the door behind him.

"I should go," I say. The way Freddy's dad looked at me is giving me the creeps.

"Wait," Freddy says. "Can you help me give my mom a bath?"

"No!" I say, jumping up from the bed. "I watched *Tak and the Power of Juju* with you and I let you put your tongue in my mouth. You are so gross, Freddy. Your whole house smells like piss."

"I will give you one of my mom's things if you help me." He goes over to the dresser, opens up the drawer, and tells me, "Come over here."

I look in the drawer. There is a heap of necklaces all tangled together and a bunch of rings. Some of them are turning green. There is a necklace that says "sexy" and another necklace with a giant ruby on it. The rings are all ugly except for one. It has got a gold band and a fat white diamond.

"Pick something," he says.

I point to the ring. "I want that."

"You can't have that. That is my mom's wedding ring."

"Then I guess I am not helping you," I say.

"Sandy."

"It is not like she's gonna miss it," I say.

"Fine. Take it."

I grab it out of the drawer and shove it in the pocket of my Limited Too jeans. "Okay, I will help you."

I help Freddy carry Baby Woman into the bathroom. The bathroom's floor tiles are black and white. There are puddles of piss all near the toilet. Someone forgot to flush.

We take off Baby Woman's diaper. Between her legs there is a slash of dark hair and I try not to look. We lower her into the bathtub and then we turn the water on. The water is brown and murky and Baby Woman keeps splashing.

He takes out a big gross yellow sponge. There is mold on it. He soaks it in the water and then puts dish soap on it. He hands it to me. "Can you scrub her back?"

I sigh. I take the sponge from him and run it over her back. Her back is spiderwebbed in moles and veins.

I touch her back with my fingers. I expect it to feel dry and coarse, like sandpaper. But it doesn't. It feels soft. It feels like my mom's skin. And when I run my fingers over her back, Baby Woman shudders a little, and I realize no one has touched her like this.

I scrub her back gently and I can hear Baby Woman making noises. She keeps trying to put her hand under the water, and Freddy keeps stopping her.

"No," he says. To me, he goes, "She's always trying to touch herself."

I look at Baby Woman's sad black eyes, and she looks scared and I realize that maybe she hadn't been trying to touch herself at all but maybe cover herself out of shame.

I hand Freddy the sponge. "Your turn."

I watch the way he scrubs her front, the way he does it quickly, like he wants to get it over with. Her skin goes raw and red, and I cringe.

When we are both done scrubbing, we rinse her off. Her skin is too big for her body. It is all loose. It is like someone dressed her in a tuxedo four sizes too big. She sags everywhere. I think about what Freddy said. About how his parents do not kiss anymore.

We towel her off and put a new diaper on her and then bring her back to the couch, so she can watch another game show. I do not understand why they do not put clothes on her. I think it is kind of weird that she is naked all the time.

"You are welcome, Mom," Freddy says.

She does not answer. She is watching the TV.

"Why don't you put clothes on her?" I ask.

"It takes too much time," he tells me. "Besides, I don't think she cares."

I look at her. "I think she'd like something to wear," I say. "Do you have like a big t-shirt or something?"

"Let me check." Freddy goes into his room and comes back with a big gray shirt with a stain on the front. I help Freddy put it on his mother, and she looks confused.

"I don't think she likes it," Freddy says. "I told you. She doesn't mind being naked."

Baby Woman looks at me. She is touching the shirt with one hand, like she doesn't know what's on her. But she doesn't look like she hates it.

I walk home from Freddy's house. I reach into my pocket and pull out the ring. It sparkles in the afternoon sun. I try it on my ring finger, but it is too big. Too big for my middle finger too. I try it on my thumb because that is my fattest finger. It is a little loose but as long as I do not put my thumb upside down, it will not fall off.

When I get home, my mom is eating dinner alone.

"Where were you?" she asks. She raises her fork. Everyone says my mother is so beautiful, but right now she is a mess. Her hair is pulled back and she is not wearing makeup but there is some mascara on her cheeks.

"At Katie's house," I tell her.

"Oh." She looks down at her plate. "You never called."

"Sorry."

"Where is your father? I just thought you were with him."

I shrug. "He never said anything to me," I say.

My mother looks upset.

In my head, I imagine that my father is having an affair. I imagine he has an intern with long red hair and big breasts. Usually this thought

makes me happy but right now it makes me sick to my stomach. I don't know why. I go upstairs to my room and put Freddy's mom's ring in my Hello Kitty jewelry box.

I wash my hands five times.

My father does not come home until nine-thirty. My mom asks him where have you been Gary and he says at work. He says it ran a little late. From up in my room, I can hear them talking.

"Good night, Sandy," they both yell upstairs to me.

"Good night, Mom," I say. "Good night, Dad."

It is past my bedtime, but I can't sleep. I am thinking about Freddy's mom. I get up and grab the ring out of my jewelry box. As quietly as I can, I creep outside into the night. I slip the ring in the pocket of my Tinkerbell nightgown and plunge my hands into the dirt. I dig a hole with my hands as quickly as I can. I toss the ring in and throw dirt over it, packing it with my hands.

I get into bed and think about Freddy and his mom and his gross dad. I fall asleep. I dream I am drinking orange juice out of a tomato sauce jar and I am on a game show and I just won a car and Freddy's dad is petting my hair and telling me I am so pretty.

TAAHIRA DAVIS

Don't Wanna be White

White is right
White is the best
Always aspire to be white

You got white blood
Good, Brag about that white blood
You like that white boy
Good, Go for that white boy
You got white friends
Good, Stick with those white friends

White is right
White is the best
Always aspire to be white

But I'm not white
I can't be white
I don't wanna be white

I've got skin kissed by the sun
Golden hues radiating
Blinding your eyes
When it's white man pale
I am bare
Not complete
I've got gorgeous curls on top of my head
Like a crown on top of royalty
When it's white girl straight
My crown's gone
Not as powerful

White isn't always right
White isn't always the best
I will not aspire to be white

I will aspire to be me

JADA GRICE

2 queens (Beyoncé in reference to Sonia Sanchez)

Den mother
Queen mother
I woke up like this mother
Blue

Remi

Carter

Fertility
Goddess
Let me dance for you and win Grammys
Let you dance for me and we exchange vows

Jay

Dance me a breakfast of births
Sing me a lunch of epidurals
Paint me a dinner of aqueducts
Yet let me cater 2 you
She reminds us that we a BaddDDD people
Oh and that jam belongs on toast
Like enjambment belongs
In Sonia Sanchez poems

JULIA RAE HODENFIELD

Silvermine

The Country Store was my house's next-door neighbor. It was where they sold penny candy and it was like living next to God or, at least his palace. We'd come in with our square pockets full of the change we slid off our dad's dresser and just go to town. Fist Twizzlers for \$.10, finger candy canes for \$.05, and Peanut Butter cups for \$.50 when we were really living. Summers were for finding that change, stuffing our faces with sweetmeat peppermint-peanut-butter-in one bite and walking the sunbaked streets of Connecticut.

Us three sisters, Margot, Renée, and I, would walk in age order. We'd wave hello to beaver-faced Joey and Tori as we did our patrol round our cul-de-sac. We'd walk. Sucking on red licorice pipes like we were slickered sailors with dependencies on tobacco. Summer melted on our tongues faster than sugar did and halfway through July the Country Store ran out of the red licorice pipes. The black licorice pipes waited at the bottom of the glass jug, waiting, desperate to be taken. Cat, the lady who worked there, was not intimidated by our shades of blonde bowl-cuts or soprano assertions and told us we could have black licorice or no licorice. We passed sweaty coins from our clam-shell hands to hers, grudgingly ripping plastic wrappers with our teeth.

That day while making our rounds our swagger was injected with trepidation. We had to admit the black licorice looked more realistic, but the taste. *The taste!* Red licorice is sweet, seductive... like red hair in a cocktail dress. The black licorice is biting, leathery, in your face like a bossy, too-sophisticated-for-you brunet. We carried on surveying the neighborhood; policed overly-extroverted squirrels and gaped at Steven Carey who shot hoop after hoop after hoop. After scrutinizing Steven's ripped torso adequately, we scarfed the pipes down like black beetles. We spat, swore "THESE TASTE LIKE CRAP!" and bought them again the very next day.

This was before we moved away. When I was Tom Sawyer with my sisters and we ran in our favorite scraps of t-shirts, plunged our ankles into Ice Rivers, collected apple cores, rolled around in grass clippings, and lost our breath listing things we would do the next day. Back when we used to throw our laundry in the machine, sit in a basket in front and watch the sodden clothes spin around and around and around. We moaned like men watching pornography, no need for TV. No, we'd climb smooth, mother-loving branches of the tree in front of the house.

Burst ants into flames with a little help of a magnifying glass and the sun. Ants, I'm not sorry. This was the house Margot taught me to wiggle my tooth, it ended up coming out while I was eating cheerios and then I accidentally ate it in the next spoon full. 278 Silvermine Ave was a dumping ground for flip flops and cool rocks. Our little black dog Victor hated being alone, so we'd let him run with us even though he barked at his shadow and licked babies' faces. It was summer, and we didn't hate life one bit. Let's tag fireflies, let's jump from the monkey bars to the trampoline, let's prank Joey and Tori, let's roll down a hill until the earth has completely switched locations with the sky. Let's.

We were a unit back then, like something you use to measure flour or salt. I find myself stuffing love into black licorice pipes and doling it to the people I get close to. Margot and Renée taught me to give condolences with candy. How to give a sweet smile when Tori and Joey got offended, how to hand a fist full of ripe blueberries in apology, how to run when it wasn't enough.

Renée sent me a box of homemade caramels in the mail last week. Just yesterday I learned she was moving across the country to California where Margot has lived for some time. Slick moves, sis. Rounds will have to be done alone, my pipe is no longer licorice and I keep it well hidden. I just think we are only really x amounts of distance between our palms when I raise my hands up. There may be buildings in the way, oceans, but I'm staring right at you.

SOPHIA GAMBER

Teacups, Skin, Etc.

There is always a moment when
I am forced to consider your skin.
In those soft grey evenings, we considered the places we would go
later, when there was time and we were able to be together.
I drew maps from here to there
on the sinewy skin of your speckled back.

Other nights, the mold grew in gorgeous rings
on the filmy surface of cups of old cloudy tea.
A tender meniscus breaks the way I often broke for you:
at the edges, pulling and puckering in the middle.
We were always pulling at
the fine surface of our shared speckled skin
like nothing ever happened, nothing displaced, nothing
lost, but there was never time and
there were never real maps or clean teacups.
I assumed that under enough heat I would always be malleable
like those finely wrought metallic things-
spoons, little silver wedding rings,
kitchen fixtures, nails-
and in the easy myopia of love
I forgot my own true organic form.

The air blurs around the edges.
I unfix my eyes and begin to see
something like particles or pixels.
In the half-light, the wrinkles forming around your eyes
look like soft grey paper
crumpled up and thrown into wastebaskets.
Each one is something left behind, underfed,
abandoned.

And I know one day we will be
a wrinkle under each other's eyes,
and someone else will find new things
to draw along your soft sinewy spine,
and there might still be moments
when teacups remind me of your skin.

JOE MAKUC

To A Rose

Nothing has a right to be so endlessly red—
But you are a strawberry in my yard,
You're so lustrous, brilliant, crimson.

Nothing can hold the green ocean—
But you are a pitcher plant in my swamp,
You contain as much verdant love as rotting lies.

Nothing—

OK, OK, I'll cut the bullshit: You are human.
You question and conjecture, cast aside and embrace,
And I can't capture that—binary frames
Leave no room to sprout, blossom, stand complete.

But I don't need to frame. If you wouldn't mind,
I would sit with you a while, talk, live--
And we'd grow together, thorns and all.

MILLIE DRURY

The Get Out

Eddy dropped a bag of Hot Takis onto the checkout counter. "That's \$2.76," said a hunched man with a name tag labeled *Rachit*. His arms leaned heavily on the scuffed, grimy counter, giving him the appearance of a stooped sack of flour. A fluorescent yellow light blinked blearily, glazing off bald patches that peeked through beneath Rachit's thinly combed hair. A fly buzzed methodically overhead, bumping into the flickering hum of the swinging light with a vengeance, ignoring the bodies of its unfortunate companions littering the tiles below.

Eddy averted his eyes from the fly as it bumped against the light one last time and joined its friends.

"But the label says \$1.60. From the sale." Eddy frowned, turning his head to the shelf he had plucked the bag from.

"Sale's over. It's \$2.76 now," Rachit replied, unfazed.

"You should really change your sign," Eddy mumbled, reaching into the back of his jeans for the two-pocket brown leather wallet riddled with lines and cracks that he'd owned since he was twelve. He fished around clumsily for exact change, pushing the coins across the counter to the apathetic cashier. The metal grated against the aluminum countertop.

Rachit picked up the change slowly, placing the coins in his coarse palm as he counted them ceremoniously.

"It's correct, you know," Eddy said, eyeing Rachit's prying fingers from behind thick glasses. "I'm in accounting." He paused. "So I can count."

Rachit looked up at him, his face empty as he popped open the cash register, sliding the change in place.

"Have a great night, Ratchet," Eddy said with a slow sigh as he grabbed his bag of Hot Takis and headed for the exit.

"It's Ruh-chit," Rachit grumbled as the bell clanged and Eddy pushed open the door.

Eddy shoved his wallet back into his jeans and searched clumsily for his keys through the pockets of his tan jacket with the corduroy cuffs.

The dim streetlamps lining the sidewalks faintly lit up the Boise streets. The pavement had a slick sheen from the most recent rainfall and glistened slightly under the lights. His car was parked just a block away, but he wrapped his coat more tightly around himself, anticipating a drizzle.

Approaching his silver 1995 Toyota Corolla, Eddy's eyebrows formed a heavy line when he saw a person in a wide poncho attempting to jimmy his car open.

"Hey! What the hell?" he shouted, breaking into a run.

Her face turned towards him, and for a moment he was caught off guard.

"Oh, is this your car?" she asked, lowering her metal slim jim for a moment and glancing back towards the sedan.

"Um, yeah," he said, his words coming out in a rasp from the tightness in his chest. Even that pathetically short run had winded him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Uh." She used her hand to brush a mass of curls away from her face. "Your car's pretty old, you should really consider getting a better alarm system."

"I'm calling the police," Eddy muttered to himself, reaching for his phone and clumsily dialing 911.

"You still have a Blackberry?" the woman asked, tucking her slim jim back beneath the folds of her knitted red poncho. "How old *are* you?"

"I use it for work," he admitted with a shrug, coughing uncomfortably as he held the device to his ear.

"You really don't need to call the cops," the woman added, folding her arms across her chest. "I'm not going to steal your car anymore."

"That doesn't mean it wasn't against the law to try."

"You shouldn't be so uptight, and please put that phone away before I take it from you; it's just fucking embarrassing. Anyways, I apologized already, so what do you need the cops for?"

"You didn't apologize," Eddy pointed out.

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry," she exhaled, rolling her eyes. "Now will you please hang up the phone?"

"No! Just because you apologize to me doesn't mean you should get away with trying to break into my car!"

"Well, I didn't actually."

"That doesn't matter!"

"Look, if I explain *why* I was trying to steal your car could you hang up the phone?"

"No!"

"911. What's your emergency?"

"It was my boyfriend," she said, averting her eyes. "He's been hitting me for months and I finally figured I should try to run away, you know?" Eddy paused momentarily, the Blackberry dropping several

inches away from his face. "But he took my car keys and I didn't know what else to do. I felt stuck."

She looked up at him with round, watery, defeated eyes and Eddy couldn't help but reconsider his choice to call the police on her.

"Hello, sir? Can you hear me?"

He slowly pressed the red 'end' button on the call and tucked the phone away.

"Well, I'm sorry that happened to you," he said, unlocking his car door. "I think it's wrong for a man to hit a woman." He paused, straightening his glasses before turning to her. "Do you need a place to stay for the night?"

She frowned at him, looking him up and down. "I'm not going to have weird, rando sex with you once we get back to your place," she said, and Eddy's eyes widened.

"What? No, that's not, um, that's not what I meant at all, it's just, I figured since you might need a place to go... I didn't mean I would ever, I just—"

"Nah, it's cool," she said, striding around to the passenger door and easily dropping down into the seat.

"Oh, okay. Good." He adjusted his glasses nervously, becoming increasingly perturbed by the interaction.

He stooped down into the driver's side seat, closing the door behind him and starting up the growling, whiny engine.

He pulled carefully out of his parking space and began heading down the streets towards his apartment, reconsidering the past several minutes and his decision to allow the strange woman to get into his car.

"So, um, what's your name?" he asked, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

"Rina," she replied, her fingers drumming against the door of the car as she stared out the window.

"Cool," he coughed uncomfortably. "I'm Eddy."

"Nice to meet you, Eddy," she said, turning back to him and holding her hand out for him to shake. He reached across the cup holders and grasped her fingers, making sure that he kept his eyes on the road and avoided looking at her.

Several long, uncomfortable minutes passed in silence before he drove up next to his building. Carefully parallel parking, he led her up to his door, walking her inside the cramped, sparsely furnished apartment. He gestured for Rina to sit on the lumpy green couch.

"The place looks great," she said, slumping into the couch cushions and gazing around the place with a distinct look of curiosity on her face.

"No, it doesn't, but I'll get another lamp or something eventually," he said, carefully sitting on the edge of the couch several feet from her. "So, I'm sorry about your boyfriend," he said, folding his hands in his lap as he leaned over to let his elbows rest on his thighs.

"My boyfriend?" she asked, frowning at him. "Oh, that!" Her face broke into a smile as she laughed. "That was complete bullshit. I don't even have a boyfriend to hit me. I just didn't want you to call the cops when I had so much weed on me," she declared, reaching beneath her poncho and pulling out a dark brown blunt. "Mind if I smoke?"

Eddy stared at her in disbelief as she pulled out a lighter and popped the blunt between her lips.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I thought you were in trouble. I thought you were trying to escape an abusive relationship when really you *were* just stealing my car!" He stood up defiantly, plucking his phone from his pocket once again. "I'm calling the cops on you."

"Look, Eddy, don't do that," Rina sighed, dropping the lighter away from her mouth. "I was trying to get out of Seattle, okay? But not to escape an abusive relationship. I just needed a change."

"And that's a good enough reason for you to steal a car?"

"You need to lighten up."

"I brought a homeless auto thief loaded with weed into my apartment. What the hell was I thinking?"

"You're too tense, and you take everything too seriously."

He took his phone out and began to dial 911 again. He had made a mistake bringing her here. His instincts had told him to call the police on her and he knew he had been right from the beginning. He had stupidly allowed himself to be fooled by her phony sob story and what was worse, had let her bring an indeterminable number of grams of weed into his apartment.

He paused with the phone halfway up to his ear. Would the police blame him for the weed too? It was in his apartment, after all, and he wasn't sure if that technically counted as possession. He supposed it would be smarter to turn her in, but his own fear of retribution held him back.

"Sit back down, Eddy," Rina said, louder this time, and gestured to the spot next to her on the couch. Speechless, he did as she said. "You're lost and you need my help. Here," she flicked her thumb against the lighter and puffed on the blunt momentarily before handing it over to him.

"I haven't smoked since college," he admitted, staring at the tiny object in his hand.

"That's why you need to do it now. You helped me out of a pinch, so I'm gonna give you some advice. I get guys like you. You live your life working at a nine to five job you hate and come home to nothing and nobody except the single serving frozen meals I can tell you buy from the piles of them in your trash can."

Eddy turned his head towards his trash can instinctively, fixing the arms of his glasses. "And smoking weed is supposed to make that change?"

"No, but you could make it change. And I can help you," she nodded towards the blunt again.

He slowly lifted it to his lips. "How?"

"You and I both need to get out," she replied, leaning back into his couch cushions. "With your car and my stash of weed, we could get along pretty well for at least a couple of weeks."

"I have a job."

"Screw your job. Your job and your life are the reasons you need to get out. Leave Idaho. Go to Oregon or Michigan or New Mexico or something. Leave here and take a break."

"So like a vacation?"

"No, not a vacation. A Get Out."

"I've never heard of that."

"A Get Out is when you just fucking leave. You let everything go and you let yourself wander around and you find yourself and you figure out why you chose that stupid job and this stupid life and decide how to change it."

He passed the blunt back to her, and she looked at him as she breathed in another lungful of smoke. He noticed her brown eyes were dim and cloudy, and it was as if the clocks had stopped working in her head, leaving her frozen in time and life.

He had lived his entire life cautiously, without ever taking a risk. But he had never felt the acid-like burn of regret about it as he did now. Rina was exactly the opposite.

"I don't think I know how to do all that," he said, staring at the blunt handed back to him.

"I can help you."

He thought back through the last ten years of his life. He had made one predictable decision after another until he'd ended up thirty six years old, divorced, bored with his job, and buying Hot Takis from the convenience store at 10:30 on a Friday night. Maybe Rina knew what she

was talking about. Or maybe she was just trying to get him to be her drug mule. Either way, he knew she was right. He needed to get out with or without her.

He took a deep breath, allowing the oxygen to flow through his body and wake up his brain. "Okay."

JANICE PARTEE

Language Accordion Volcano Mouth

I am printmaking all these rescued tips (fingers and tongue)
using the oral liquid-crunch secretion from Yesterday's smothering
avalanche.
By process of swallowing and printing,
I speech out the unfree with careful attention to volume.
As an observable conscious
I, I, I,
am present even though past and I have never met.
Human with objection,
neglected hospital bed curtains clothe my corneas while sponging my
speech.
Continuing to print and swallow,
I enter arguments with my tongue's invading texture, for although
invasion always comes with unnatural friendliness,
I cannot speak when it weaves the top braille-decorated layer of its skin
aggressively along the tips of my teeth.
Another "cannot" I have is rescuing teeth.
I cannot rescue teeth because they are independent.
Teeth move.
And they do not tell you, because they do not care whether you know,
so because I cannot rescue teeth, I am pulling them.
Upon a pull of tooth amongst my tongue's conversing,
a sandpaper word sends me observably upwards;
an apologetic word sends me to center with myself.
For my tongue is still mine,
my in is talking to my out (without feedback).
I pull another tooth from a deep cavity and disturb a lymph node nested
nearby.
As I try to swallow,
the doormat under the printer begins to oscillate, increasing in intensity.
My speech has hit impediment, but the rising debris clouds from my
disturbed inner landscape produce sounds equivalent to lullabies;
I am singing on the outside.
Underneath my speech, I inaudibly question:
why an "impediment"?
Conflicting it with: "why, an impediment!"
For I do not know whether this is a characteristic to rename or rejoice.

However, I know there are tips I've ignored.
Organs from snow I've so far collected leave me wanting more.
After living so long in after, never having before,
I hunger for rescuing unknowns.
Imagine stretching a word to observation only for it to boomerang from
your mouth's roof to the gum-floor,
or having truth lost in the silence of unreleased words.
I do not want a memorial,
I want my autonomy.
Do not speak for me.
Do not print for me.
I wish my mother could give my truth to me.
Tips.
I need more.
Throw me to the very bottom of texture
where there are bodies in pianos,
organs under floorboards...
An observation collected their home's heart of authenticities found knit
inside an avalanche
and died there: rested pieces.

NICOLE KOSAR

Becoming Ourselves

I looked outside the window, watching the wind wrestle with the bare trees. I was more likely to get blown away than reach the car safely. I glanced at my younger sister, who was currently unwrapping a scarf from around her neck. She had no chance. As soon as we stepped outside, the wind was going to carry her away. I told Mom just that. She said I was being dramatic and briskly adjusted the scarf around Alice's neck.

"Ready?" Mom asked.

"No," I grumbled.

Mom opened the door.

Her own mother died a few months back. I don't remember very much about Nana dying. I remember when Nana came to stay with us for a while—Alice and I would cover our fingers in blackberry juice to make it look like we were bleeding then act out some sort of tragic scene for her. I remember standing over a slab of stone, my mom sobbing loudly and clutching me close. Alice watched, eyes wide in fear.

I tried not to think about any of that. My grief for Nana was replaced with a whisper of fear, fear of what would happen to me once my parents got old. But, I kept that issue safely wrapped and tucked in a box in the corner of my brain, covered in packing peanuts and bubble wrap. Dad used to assure me that I didn't need to think about all that for a long time. But that was before Dad packed his suitcase.

Once safely inside Nana's old red car, Mom broke the news.

"We're gonna go visit Great-Aunt Marta."

"Maaa," I said. "Why now? Can't we do it tomorrow?"

"We're already in the car," she said, smug victory in her voice. She flipped her dark hair out of her face. "She needs help settling in. Maybe if you're good, we'll go get food after."

"Lemonade!" Alice said. "I want lemonade!"

"Only if you're good," Mom said sternly then put the car into drive. We ventured the too-empty streets of Burlington, and I cracked my window open a little to sniff the air. The smell of fresh air and snow and cold ice washed away the other scents of the car better than any air freshener.

"Close the window," Alice howled. "It's freezing."

"You shoulda worn a better jacket," I said, clicking the beige window button defiantly. I watched the Vermont landscape, muted by frost and cold, swish by my window. If I stared hard enough, I could catch

glimpses of other lives through the warm yellow lights. My eyes watered, and I blinked. When I resumed my watch, I found a dark tint obscuring my view. Mom had rolled the window back up. I opened my mouth to complain but let the sound of the car slicing through the wind drown my words.

The nursing home reception room was small. One big, shiny desk with that plastic-y wood, one big, low-hanging lamp, and three worn but comfortable red chairs, although I'm pretty sure I bruised my butt when I jumped onto one of them.

Alice reached up to poke my left cheek. "Poke," Alice said seriously. I glowered at her and she grinned, that same victory-grin Mom had on earlier. I poked her back, and she ran screeching to Mom. Brat.

"Kira," Mom hissed at me, trying to comfort the little snake that clutched her leg. I wished Dad was here. Then I remembered why Dad left, and I snatched that wish right back out of the universe.

"It's not my fault," I said. I was tired and cold, and Alice was being stupid and Mom was taking her side. Glancing around the empty room, I added, "I don't even want to be here!"

"Oh, no you don't," Mom said. "You're ten years old now, Kira."

"So?" I said.

Mom marched over and looked down at me, fire burning behind her pale green eyes. "So, you're too old for me to deal with your crap. I listen to it all day from other people at the insurance company. For hours. Do you know how many hours I work? How many hours I sit there and listen to people complain? Hm? Do you?"

I watched a bit of spittle fly from her mouth.

"So, Kira. So, you do not get to ruin my day off. You do not get to act like Dad."

I tried to swallow past the brick that formed in my throat. I wanted to scream or stomp my foot or throw something, but I knew nothing I did would matter. I'd just be proving her point. I'd be acting like Dad.

Alice poked her head around. "Daddy?"

"Oh, no, no, Alice." Mom pried Alice's fingers from her hand and pushed her towards me.

Alice glanced up at me. "Is Daddy coming?"

I shook my head.

"Daddy's not coming," Mom said, all quiet rage and eyes pinning me to the floor like a bug. "He was a lazy man, and a lazy father. We're on our own."

"No," I said. "We're stuck with you."

"Watch your mouth, Kira." Mom sat down on one of the hard chairs.

"Why don't you just visit Great-Aunt Marta by yourself?" I said, looking away.

"Because!" Mom exploded out of her seat. "Because you need to be here."

"Who...who were you looking for again?" The receptionist interrupted.

"Marta Rossi," my mother growled, turning her anger on the poor lady. "Like I said before, she just got moved here. I've been standing here for ten minutes while you did *what*, exactly, since you obviously weren't looking for Marta Rossi's room?"

The receptionist winced and asked for an ID. Mom slapped it onto the table, looking down at the poor lady, glare in full force and right shoe tapping all the while.

I silently prayed for the receptionist.

A filed complaint later, Mom led us into an elevator. I felt like cattle, being herded this way and that. I told Mom and she rolled her eyes at me and said "Tough." My bottom lip jutted out all on its own, and I folded my arms. I watched my reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator and pushed my cheeks together.

"Ma, why do they have mirrors in elevators?"

"Because people are vain," Mom said, leaning towards one wall to fix her lipstick.

"What does vain mean?"

"It's when people think they're better than they are." She turned to me with a loaded stare, meaning locked behind the words.

"Like Daddy?" Alice asked. I turned to her sharply, ready to slap a hand over her mouth, but Mom smiled.

The elevator door clacked open, revealing an unseen land. All thoughts fizzled away as I was assaulted by the light.

My first thought was how white it all was. All bright linoleum. The tiles on the floor were sterile and clean, and I focused on not stepping on the grey-brown lines that cut the white into squares. It was brighter than the sun and reminded me of snow in early morning. Untouched, and silent. White drywall stretched for ages, the equally white ceiling breaking for long strips of lightbulbs. So bright, I couldn't look straight at them. Like a man-made sun.

Danger seeped through those linoleum cracks. I couldn't step on those cracks, or the dark would reach out and grab my ankle. Spots and odd-shaped stains discolored the white of the drywall.

Every single hallway looked the same. Beige doors spaced three feet apart. Some carts or plastic shelving littering the hallways. I was impressed with how confidently Mom navigated the hallways. She always seemed to know where to go. If she wasn't complaining, I knew everyone was good.

I tried to stay on Mom's heels and keep a watchful eye on my sister. The desolate landscape seemed to swallow up life and the ever-curious Alice found several opportunities to detour, straying far enough to examine the contents of the carts. As soon as I saw her veer off the path, my arm shot out and snatched her wrist, lugging her along like we were crossing a particularly dangerous stretch of highway.

We halted abruptly at one of the beige doors. The curdling orange number 495 glared down at me. Mom pushed open the door to greet her aunt.

Marta was the last of my grandmother's sisters. She was very important to my mom, and she always gave me little rock-hard Jelly Beans.

"OH!" Marta squealed. I didn't know adults squealed. "You brought the girls. Come here, come here!"

I was dragged into a big hug, mashed against Marta and my bony sister. Over her shoulder, I caught glimpses of Marta's room. A thin, white plastic bedframe was covered in tape and photos, small and large showing my cousins, my uncle, even me and my sister. The four white walls were covered with children's art and more photos and cards were spilling over the top of the small, dark dresser. A fat, wet drop landed on my forehead. I broke away to wipe it off and found Marta sniffing.

"Uh, Ma," I said timidly.

Mom leaned in to hug Great-Aunt Marta as well. "We brought more pictures, too, Marta!"

"Oh, dear me," she said as she reached for a tissue. "Thank you, sweets."

"So, how was the move? Do you like your new place?"

Marta looked around. "Well, it's certainly not *home*, but I suppose..."

"Well, like you always told me, home is where family is." Mom reached over to tape one picture of Alice and I hugging onto a wall.

"Yes!" Marta said, tears welling up in her eyes again. "Yes! Family is everything. Everything. So, girls! Tell me about school! Home! All of it!"

Mom nudged me, sending me a meaningful glare.

"Oh! Um, good. I'm in fifth grade. My teacher's mean but I like my class." I searched my memories for more experiences. "Uh, I had to write a bunch of poems for our poetry unit. Mom put one up on the fridge, but I don't like it very much."

"Oh! That's so wonderful!" Her hands clapped together. "Do you have any with you?"

I shook my head.

"Bring some next time! I would so, so love to see them."

"We will," Mom promised. "Alice is in second grade, and she loves it, right Al?"

Alice's response was a firm and resounding, "Yes!"

"Oh good!" Great-Aunt Marta turned to me. "And what about you, dear?"

I frowned. "I'm in fifth grade."

"How nice! Any fun projects this year?"

I glanced up at mom. "Uh, I wrote some poetry..."

"Oh!" Marta leaned forward to smile, yellowing teeth long and wide. "Did you bring any with you?"

"No..." I backed away, stumbling over a box on the floor. It was filled with bubble wrap.

"We'll bring some next time," Mom said quickly. "How are you? Is everything settled? Are all your medications set up?"

Marta flapped a hand in dismissal. "Look on the dresser. Roger stopped by earlier and he—"

I glanced up sharply. "Dad's here?"

Mom snatched the small post-it note from the dresser. "Typical. Roger was supposed to sign off for the meds to transfer but—" Mom stopped, remembering who her audience was. "Kids, go on outside."

"Oh, sweet Kira," Marta trapped me in the fleshy, flabby cage of her arms, stroking my blonde hair. "She looks so much like him, doesn't she, Liz?"

Mom's eyes narrowed. "Kids. I want to talk to Great-Aunt Marta alone for a second."

"You know I hate to bother you," Marta said as Mom ushered us out of the room. "But my great-nephew always says he's much too busy..."

"Oh, I know," Mom huffed, then closed the door with a click.

I leaned against the wall and turned to find green eyes gazing up at me.

"Let's play pretend!"

I shook Alice's sticky hand off my arm.

"Come on! Let's..." Alice glanced around. Far-away chirps echoed down the hallway. They sounded like birds. She grinned at me wildly. "Birds!"

"Alice!" I yelled. "No, wait, Alice!"

I reached out to snatch her arm, but she sprinted down the hallway and disappeared from view. I flung myself down the hallway after her, barreling around the corner and nearly tripping over a wheelchair. As I scrambled around it, an arm grabbed me.

I jumped, and the arm didn't budge. It was old, saggy, and attached to the woman in the wheelchair. She leaned forward, her frost-colored, short hair brushing my face.

"Now, where do you think you're going?" the old woman said, voice crackling.

"Excuse me," I said politely, wincing. The smell of moldy flour rose from her in a cloud.

"You're not getting away that easy! Only if you answer correctly."

"What? No!" I tugged my arm uselessly, knocking into a nearby metal crate. A few boxes on the top shaking, spilling peach-colored packing peanuts onto the floor.

"I thought you learned your lesson." The old woman stared at me with milky, swirling eyes.

"Lesson?"

The old woman shook her head mournfully and clacked her wheelchair around to start rolling down the hallway, one hand still gripping my wrist painfully. I watched her bicep bulge and relax as she pulled me along, like tug of war with my arm.

"Please," I tried again. "I have to go."

"Skip class?" She bared her brown teeth at me. "Are you *skipping*?"

She stopped in front of a blank, white door, grey with age. She yanked the door open and it banged against the wall. Empty darkness swallowed the bright white lights. "Get in."

"Wha—?"

"In!" The old lady grabbed both my arms and nearly lifted me off the ground. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but a croak came out instead. I grasped the edge of the doorframe and she smacked my hand. I yanked my hand back, fingers stinging, as she began to close the door. I stuck my foot out, catching the door before it closed.

I swallowed a scream. The old lady ran over my shoe with her wheelchair. The sliver of white light was closing.

My heart was blasting through a stereo somewhere. Something was squeezing my throat shut. My lungs stopped working. The door swallowed the light.

"No!" I choked out. "Stop!"

The old lady froze, on hand still on my shoulder. "You learned your lesson?"

"Yes! I p-promise!"

"Well, then. Answer correctly."

"...Answer what?" I craned my neck around the old woman, scanning for my sister. My mom. Anyone.

She huffed a laugh, her exhale of rotting flowers reaching out with leaves and twigs. "Ha!"

"Please," I whispered.

"Recite the Apostles' Creed!"

I leaned away, her excitement taking up physical space. "Recite it?"

She grabbed my arm again. "That's what I just said, isn't it?"

"Uh," I searched my memory. "I didn't learn it."

"Liar!"

I saw her slap my wrist before I even registered it. It echoed in my head as my skin turned white then red. And then I felt it. It was painful, but the knowledge that this old lady I didn't know hit me hurt worse.

"Now, come on," she coaxed, voice all raspy. "You know it. It starts with 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty...'"

"I b-believe in God th-the Father..."

"Almighty!" she corrected, tightening her grip, blue veins bulging from her wrinkled skin. "Say it. The Father Almighty."

"The Father Almighty."

"Now the rest! Go on."

"I can't..."

She laughed, a gurgling sound. "Very funny, young lady. If you keep up those jokes, I'll just put you right back in that closet." She dragged me closer, whispering, "Do you want that?"

I wanted to pull away, but I couldn't. The only thing behind me was the closet, its maw wide open and ready to swallow—

"Kira?" Alice's dark brown hair bobbed into view. She stuck her head down the hallway.

The old lady's eyes rolled over to Alice. "Ah! Come, child. Tell this impudent girl how the creed goes."

Alice slunk closer. "The what?"

"Alice, go get Mom," I ordered. The old woman's grip was bruising my skin.

"Go on!" the old woman continued. "He who was Creator of heaven and earth! How could you forget! You're not—supposed to—forget!"

Before she finished, the old lady lunged forward, her free hand curling into a claw as she reached for Alice—

I pulled away, shrieking.

"Mrs. Hendricks!"

A nurse in blue appeared, slapping the old woman's hand away from me. The old woman cradled her hand and moaned like a beaten dog. "You know better, Mrs. Hendricks. Come on, let's get you back in bed."

"Wait!" The woman's eyes roved around, searching for me. She reached out with a mangled, cooked finger. "She's my student!"

I shuddered and backed away.

"She's not your student," the nurse said, none too gently steering the wheelchair into a room. "Your students are long gone."

A whine erupted, filling the hallway. It was coming from the old woman, slowly turning into a scream. Before it could reach top volume, nurse closed the door, muffling any sound.

The nurse turned back to me with a wink. "Sorry about that."

"Kira!"

My mom was hurdling towards me, her heels clipping down the silent hallway. Great-Aunt Marta shuffled alongside her.

"Ma!" I said.

"Kira, Alice," Mom eyed the nurse. "Are you okay?"

The nurse smiled tersely. She must already know Mom's reputation. "Everything's fine. Mrs. Hendricks gets a little confused sometimes. She used to be a schoolteacher at the catholic boarding school. She was just as crazy then, too."

Mom offered the nurse and close-lipped smile. "As we get older, we become more ourselves."

The nurse sighed. "That we do. That we do." She reentered Mrs. Hendricks room, now silent.

Marta finally caught up and wrapped her arms around me. I was sinking into the pillow of her stomach when she started to cry.

"A-are you okay, Kira?" she sniffed.

"The question isn't if she's okay," Mom snapped. "It's why she ran away when I told her to just wait outside."

"Hey!" I said. "Alice ran away first and—"

"Excuses," Mom spat. "Who does that sound like?"

"Daddy!" Alice said happily. She knew her cues.

My mom's heels echoed through the hallway as she walked away, breaking the home's silence. Great-Aunt Marta shuffled alongside her, the pink slippers a splotch of illegal color.

I watched Mom march away, one hand dragging Alice along. She turned around and glared at me, eyes slashing through that box in my head. Packing peanuts and bubble wrap and stringy thoughts spilling all over my brain.

What will happen to me when she gets old?

KEVIN LEÓN

in front of the bathroom mirror

my eyes are not black,
but under normal conditions
an obsidian island sits undisturbed,
gentle pearl waves getting to know polished shores.

it's not until those innocent moments
before the bathroom sink
with my hands mechanically pressing a brush against my teeth,
with my hands rigidly using tweezers to pluck my unibrow,
with my hands slowly melting into a towel,
that i can finally see the dark circles' walnut finish
and the white ocean becomes an antarctic glacier,
rivers of hot crimson rushing through,
eating the ice sheet.

i remember how when rebekah and i used to fight
i would punch myself in the face,
this would upset her—
the violent nature, the anger fueling it.

as i watch myself in the mirror
i clench my fist,
i watch the skin redden, embers underneath,
i'd wanted to see what my face looks like
what it does when my fist connects
what impossible contractions my facial muscles contort,
what mystical flamingo my facial tissues swell to,
but every time, just as my knuckles make contact,
i am unable to get a good view.

what i'd give to see without my eyes

JASON BENNETT

Cardinal Rule at Stephen J. Memorial

I walk up to the stairs, breathing in deeply, preparing myself. I expect to know no one except the corpse and her family. As I reach the top step I think of the smell of cotton candy and the waves crashing against the Boardwalk at Belmar, my armor before I dare to walk through the door. The weight of the door pushes back against me as I pass over the threshold. The guest book resting on the table waits for mourning guests to sign their names, but I follow the crying into the next room. A girl with the same jet-black hair as Ana is setting up an easel and placing a poster board onto it. I turn towards the display.

Arranged like a school poster project is a collage of pictures mixed in with art that she'd done. There are pictures of her laughing and smiling, pictures of her hugging friends, and even some selfies. One stands out to me; she is smiling like she had that day towards the end of eighth grade. I had picked up her books when some jerks bumped into her after algebra. We had been drifting apart leading up to high school. It could have been our realization that she was going to Chesterbrook Academy while I was going to Hamilton High. It could also have been the fact that I had professed my love for her while walking home the last day of class in seventh grade. The summer apart didn't do much to make our classes together in eighth grade any less awkward. So when she smiled down at me while I shuffled her folders back into a pile on the floor, I felt like my world was restored.

God, those eyes haven't changed since we were kids. All the artwork surrounding the pictures of her, each one just plain black pen, looks ready to be tattooed on a bicep. I take a breath and move on into the viewing room.

There is a stark contrast between the guests here. In the rows of chairs in front of the raised platform that the casket rests on, people sit in formal black funeral attire. I can only assume this is extended family, here out of sorrow or obligation, I can't be sure yet. Along the back walkway leading into the room is a group of younger people. Each one has greasy hair falling onto Alice in Chains long sleeved shirts. Good god. It's eighty degrees today and not one of them can keep their hands from scratching their necks or the sleeves of their shirts. Seeing these junkies sway as they attempt to stand still is making me seethe with contempt. How can you come to a funeral high on the same stuff that killed the girl in the casket? I

try push the thought from my head that these people had anything to do with Ana dying but the thought keeps biting. Junkies travel in packs.

A young man rises from a chair in the back row. His black hair is cut military style, and the shoulder pads of his blazer are screaming as they try to contain his enormous frame. Jesus Christ, Patrick always did want to be the biggest in the room one day. He was two or three years older than Ana. She always thought her big brother with more admiration than I knew was possible. He smiles as he walks up to me; he can tell I just recognized him. I reach out my hand, but he puts both arms out to the side.

"What d'ya think? Did all those deadlifts finally pay off?" He crushes me in a bear hug as I muster a smile.

"I think it may have been the steak and mashed potatoes Ana made for you after all your games."

His lips curl up but his eyes droop at the mention of his baby sister. "Anyway. How have you been Nick?"

"Twenty months and counting," I say as I dangle my key ring with the one-year anniversary coin hanging down.

"That's good, man. I'll be honest, I was shocked when Ana called home that day and was telling my mom about you being there with her. I mean, I love my Ana, but you just always seemed to have your shit together."

"Yeah, uh, thanks. I'll be back, Patrick, I'm going to get in line."

He's realized his crude remark and the lack of legitimate responses I could have given and nods his chin at me. I turn towards the casket and join the line of people wrapping around the room. The people ahead of me are commenting on how beautiful the flowers are. Behind them is a shelved arrangement of dozens of flowers. I scan the rows of bouquets for mine. There it is: purple, top left corner, second to last shelf. At the front of the room, people stand or kneel at the casket, and then greet Ana's parents.

An elderly couple is in front of the casket, the man kneeling and his wife resting a hand on his shoulder while holding an embroidered handkerchief over her chest. The husband rises, and the couple turns to Ana's parents. The men grasp hands and nod, the husband putting his free hand on Ana's father's shoulder. Ana's mother smiles the same smile she had for all the others.

Two young girls follow their parents towards Ana's parents. I am the next person in line. I look down at my faded dress shoes as if walking weren't an unconscious action and will myself to step toward and kneel on the cushioned stool. Even though I haven't seen Ana in over a year, I do

not remember her like this. This is the first time I have consciously thought that there is a science to preserving bodies. Bloated may not be the right word, but it is the only word that comes to mind as I look into her closed eyes and her eyelashes resting on puffed cheeks where Ana's prominent jawline should be.

I try to push away the thought that they didn't find her right away. She was in New York. That's all I knew. Her parents were on vacation in Florida, so for all I know she could have been gone for days. I know why she was there. You can find heroin in every neighborhood in Monmouth County New Jersey. It's a clean syringe that's the problem. No insulin prescription needed in New York to buy hypodermics. What I don't know is where she parked, why she did it there, was she lonely, and was she crying. I don't need to say good-bye. This body isn't Ana. I get up to face the living.

"Hi Mr. and Mrs. Downing."

Ana's mother's eyes light up and she wraps her arms around me.

"I'm so happy you're here. I look at you and still see you and Ana jumping off the shed in the backyard. I remember getting a call from her the first week at Stephen J. saying I wouldn't believe who was there with her. I think when you left the program it was really hard for her. We thought she had been doing well living with Travis. Anyway, she'd be happy you're here and doing well."

I wonder what that call sounded like. I remember her showing up at Stephen J. I remember falling in love with her the second time.

Despite the rat's nest of hair that tops the girl who was brought in by the two nurses, despite the chewed fingernails, and even despite the scowl that contorts her face into an almost unrecognizable girl, I see Ana. Is that Ana? She spits a thank you to the nurse escorting her into the room. Ana was a sweetheart; who is this? She struts over toward the group of us playing checkers. She grabs my flannel and pulls me from the table and towards the privacy of the water fountain.

"Am I losing my mind or are you Nick Miller, the cute but obsessive little boy I grew up with?"

"We're the same age Ana."

She rolls her eyes and bends over to get a drink of water. "I say little because I never thought you'd grow up to be a big bad junkie."

"Is that what you are?"

"You tell me."

She crosses her arms and leans back against the wall. Are these two girls the same person? That Ana I knew showed up ten minutes early to class everyday but never raised her hand despite knowing all the

answers. This Ana in front of me has duct tape around the toe of her converse sneaker and walked straight up to me five minutes ago and interrupted a game of checkers. That Ana made me weak in the knees everyday of middle school. Why is This Ana making my knees weak too?

I'm fighting tears and holding in everything I want to say to Ana's parents.

"Yeah, it was really hard for me too. She was a wonderful girl. Ana's words helped me more than anything. I'll let you go. It was really nice to see you both again."

Ana's mother hugs me again, and her father and I shake hands. I walk away as briskly as possible without drawing any extra attention. After pushing through the doors leading back out into the foyer, I double over.

Patrick comes in seconds after I start sobbing. I wipe my cheek with my sleeve.

"Hey, man, I know it's rough. You need anything?"

I look back at him and can't hold it in any more. "She asked me to leave, ya know?" I can't believe I'm saying this to her brother! I can't tell him what happened. I can't.

Dr. Evanowski at Stephen J. had his cardinal rule, no relationships in the center, but I was falling in love with This Ana as deeply as I had with That Ana. We were sitting in her room one night. Her roommate had just been taken to the hospital after taking eight nights worth of Seroquel she had stashed. Ana and I talked for hours, and she broke down telling me about the time last year she stole from Patrick to buy a quarter gram. I finally got her to smile and she looked up at me. Her eyes were just as I remember them. These aren't the eyes of This Ana, that dart across the room involuntarily even so often. These are the eyes of That Ana, that beamed down at my shuffling her folders into a pile. I missed those eyes. I wanted to kiss her. So I did. She got up and walked to the door. I panicked and fumbled for words to apologize. She stopped with her hand resting on the door handle, then locked the door and turned around. In a single step she was in front of me with her hands on my face, kissing me. We stayed in that room for hours and not once did that stupid rule come up.

The rule didn't come up the next fifteen days we spent meeting in her room at noon; we could escape lunch and go unnoticed for an hour. I was in heaven. She was in hell.

"I can't fucking do this!" she shouted as soon as I locked her door on the sixteenth day.

"What's going on?"

"You haven't seen me shaking you asshole? I'm fiending like I never have before! If I wanted a fix right now anymore that I already do, my fucking heart would explode. That rule is there for a reason, Nick. This is killing me."

I tried to smooth it over. I tried to apologize. All the while she was shaking, saying she needed me gone, or a bag of dope right now. She was terrified she would derail completely, like Evanowski warned. So I left. I loved her and if me leaving meant maybe we could be sober and together years later, so be it.

I look up at Patrick and tell him the truth.

"Listen Patrick. I loved Ana. I thought she loved me, but I don't know anymore. They said this Travis guy was really helping. God, I just hope she really was doing better. I want her to be the peaceful happy girl she always was. If she left like that I guess that's all I can ask. I just wish I could have been this Travis guy."

Patrick frowns and picks me up from my bent over position. "Listen, Nick, even when you two were kids, I always thought you two were gonna end up together. Maybe meeting at Stephen J. wasn't an accident. I can't say. What I can say is I would have given anything for you to be the one Ana was living with, and not this loser Travis." My best friend was working in the emergency room the night Ana came in. He told me Travis was the one who brought her in. He said the loser nearly crashed through the sliding glass doors trying to carry her in from the cab. He was high as a kite. Maybe my parents were naive enough to think Travis was really helping Ana, but if I knew about her living with him, I'd have taken her home, pronto."

He points through the open double doors back into the viewing room. A skinny telephone pole of a man is accepting a hug from an older woman. He has the same look of mourning on his face that Ana's mother wears. My blood boils. I can see from twenty feet away that his palms are shaking in between the hugs and handshakes. It's eighty degrees and he is wearing a long-sleeved flannel. He's using. He's using at Ana's funeral while acting like this. I'm going to fucking kill him.

I need to get a handle on myself. I'm praying the bathroom will be empty, so I can cry, vomit, or break a mirror. As I splash water on my face, the door swings open and Travis stumbles in. He walks past me to the urinals and tries to unbuckle his belt and stand up straight at the same time.

He fumbles with his belt and drops something on the floor. He bends down to pick up a square tin foil packet while holding his pants up

with his other hand. He shoots me a stupid smile. He straightens up and uses my shoulder for support before starting to walk out.

"Hey!" I squeak at him, unable to produce the menacing shout I intend.

He turns back to me. "Umm, what's up?"

"You're high. You're high right fucking now with Ana in there, dead. You don't even have the decency to get high at home and cry your eyes out? You had to bring the whole gang of scarecrow junkies with you while you act like this martyr that helped Ana?"

His shoulder slips off the stall door he has been leaning on and he crumples down the floor. He lets out a moan as his eyes close.

"Jesus Christ." I squat down to pick him up and make sure he keeps breathing.

He squints his eyes at me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Nick. I went to—"

Just as I'm thinking I should go get some coffee from the foyer to keep his heart beating, his eyes shoot open when I say this.

"As in Nick that grew up with Ana? As in the Nick that fucked Ana in rehab?"

I drop my hands from supporting him and he splays out on the tile floor. "Watch your mouth jerkoff, you don't understand what we had."

"You're right, I don't know you *think* you had with Ana. But I do know what you did to her. You broke her Nick. Nick. I heard your name probably four hundred times." He mumbles and slurs his speech, still barely able to keep his head up.

"What are you talking about?" I sit on the toilet next to him.

"Do you not get how badly you fucked her up? I would come home from work and she'd be writing these sad as shit poems in this little journal. About you and life and stuff. She would only ask me if I scored any dope today."

I can feel my heart beating in my thought. "That doesn't make sense." I can barely understand his response through the gurgle of spit in his mouth.

"What do you mean, make sense? Ana was the saddest girl I've ever met. Honestly, when I saw her in the car I wasn't even sure it was gonna be dope; figure I might see a gun in her hand when I opened the door."

I shake my head. I can't comprehend. "Ana was always so happy."

He squints up at my and rubs his eye. "Are we talking about the same girl, man?"

"I don't know anymore."

JULIA RAE HODENFIELD

Voyeurs

Isabel Rotknick, Pine House 10:49pm

I saw them and like
he was totally just like
trying to fuck. they grinded like
to Lana Del Ray's *Summer Time* like
Sadness. Bethany and I DJed and couldn't like
believe they were flirting but I guess since his girlfriend like
is out of town he thought he could fog her eyes up like
windows

Tyler Knicks, Pine House 9:45pm

yeah so the rugby team made 1,000 vodka Swedish fish
and invited all the chicks in Lambda Ro but as usual
some unaffiliated peeps came but it's cool as long as ratios
are good to swarm the chicks like mosquitos you know.
but this one narp was talking to this one chick and she
wrapped her hair around her finger and just pulled a
whole fucking chunk out but this guy just kept up with the jokes.

Cameron Pump, Outside Bench 12:38am

i mean it wasn't staring i was just smoking a cigarette at the bench because
uh
the music
uh
was so loud from the party in my house I had to
uh
sit outside and her window was wide frickin open like one of those uh
whats it called...
oh yeah picture windows. the whole frickin room was all lit up to like,
uh, like a jack o' lanterns fist
right?
so this one real scare-crow looking guy is kissing this girl in the window
and uh
he starts pulling at her dress and
uh I guess uh
it was like a type of scarf and
it just unraveled like an ace bandage.

Judy Morale, Piper House 1:12am

Savage knocks thrap from the other side of my wall—Jesus, Mary, Joseph
Pray for the sins that bubble from the mouth of my neighbor.

She has surely glued herself to the Devil himself and celebrates by filling
MY air

With tainted moans of putrid immorality.

Dear God, this trenchant hussy's recycling spills onto my corner of the
hall.

Moist, photographs crumpled into balls...

I plug my ears with rosary beads.

Jullip Potstern, Piper House 12:07am

He scoops me into his arms

like I am a bundle of warm leaves and says,

"baby, I'm all yours tonight."

He begins by placing his pink mouth slug

on my neck and slithers it up to the base of my skull.

I hear the ffft of sugar packets tearing,

feel sand pouring down my back

"fuck, I love how you smell"

the room clouds from the vanilla scented

aerosol can tripped by his finger.

He places his mouth on mine,

swishes some saliva around and unravels

my dress. I feel like the red net

of blood cells on a scrape but he says

"you're beautiful"

and wraps the dress around me again.

"can I just...?"

he scotch-tapes a photo onto my face

and eventually tears it with the gusto of his mouth slug.

He guides me on top of him,

my knees burn slick against the rug,

thigh slaps the side of the printer

"OH MONICA" he spits from

gritted teeth.

MORGAN MCAFEE

Overture

The day my husband of just four years broke my nose was the first time my mother suggested to me that something might have been amiss in our relationship. I suppose – in truth – it was as much as my fault as was it his, concealed broken ribs and bruised wrists time and time again. She would always see but never ask, insisting that his financial stability surpassed his drinking tendencies and that he would grow up if we'd "finally have some kids already."

There was a time when it wasn't always like that. A time when – believe it or not – we were both blushing high schoolers, desperate to catch one another's eye every chance we had. A time when I was just Bettie and he was just David and he didn't spend all of his afternoons piss drunk in front of the television, yelling about how he wished he'd married Sally Jones instead. When he'd come to the door before each date and cordially ask my father if I was home. I couldn't *possibly* wait to be "Mrs. Conway" and have an army of little Conway babies.

And then there I was.

"My God, Bettie! What happened?" my mother exclaimed as I stormed through the front door, face severely bruised with a bag full of clothes slung over my shoulder.

I made quite the sight, walking from my house to my mother's. The town I grew up in and made my own home in was small enough that you could walk from one end to the other in a little over forty-five minutes. Quite picturesque, with neatly trimmed lawns and freshly power-washed front porches. Inside I knew most wives suffered same as I and the fact that nobody really cared about that statistic bothered me in a way that it didn't seem to bother the rest of the population. It was even worse, keeping a tissue close to my sore nose and my head down that none of them stopped to ask if I was alright; they all knew.

"Nothing," was the best I could come up with, brushing past her and into my old childhood bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

"Bettie!" she persisted, opening the door quicker than it'd been closed, and suddenly I was brought back to the feeling of being fifteen all over again, her lack of respect for my privacy and personal space not having changed a bit since. "Tell me what happened."

"I married an asshole," I laughed a bit deliriously at saying it out loud, and to my mother. I didn't really even want to give her any answer, but it was the first thing that bubbled out of my mouth. My mom just

stared back at me – still shell shocked – and I wished it'd been my grandmother. I could practically hear her rebuttal: "they're *all* assholes, sweetheart."

Honestly, I didn't know why I showed up there. Maybe I was hoping my father would have been home, or maybe it was just because I had nowhere else to go. None of the people I'd ever considered friends would take me in. Their husbands would all say it was my problem, same as it was my own husband's. I didn't try because I didn't want to make their own situations worse for them. I knew it'd be my mother at the door, but I still went. And I didn't want to tell her what happened, didn't want to tell anyone what happened really. I didn't want to hear the sympathy or, worse, the lack thereof.

"*David* did this to you?" my mother chirped in astonishment, like the thought had never—could never—have crossed her mind. Not here, in the sweet, quiet suburbs of northern Pennsylvania. I felt another stab of feeling at that, couldn't help thinking that that was just as much *my* fault as it was hers and his.

I didn't answer her because I didn't think she needed one at this point. I sat on my childhood bed, remembering all the days I'd spent there, dreaming of being married and having children, living my life, being *just like* my mother. And now, sitting there, we couldn't have been more and more worlds away from one another. That's not to say we were closer when I was little, I just couldn't wait to grow up. There were times when I was little that I'd tell my grandmother that I wished she'd been my mother instead of her, because kids are nothing if not brutally honest.

"*C'est la vie*," she'd quip in her fake little sympathetic drawl, "Your mother is your mother because that's how God wanted it. Just like He wanted me to be your grandmother." She'd always pull my hair or tweak my nose after those serious sorts of insights, so nothing was ever too serious, but she knew I'd take it how she intended me to.

"This is – well this is ridiculous! What happened?" my mother was still talking before I'd disappeared into my own mind. It unnerved me, her need to know. What hadn't happened?

Trying to properly explain how your husband broke your nose is like trying to explain quantum physics to a four-year-old. Planets, galaxies, eternities apart, you fumble for words that don't make you out to be insane. I'd seen my dad slap my mother a time or two growing up, and maybe there was a time when she understood the toxicity of another person needing to exert their power over you, but I could feel the differences in perspectives. I never considered myself much like her, but I guess we weren't so different. Tried to think of all the times I'd spent

graveside, telling this story over and over, but I was still at a loss for words.

"It doesn't matter what happened, mom," I found myself saying, my eyes trained to the floor, the neutral grey carpet on which I'd spent day after day playing with my dolls, marrying them off, giving them a *purpose*. "The point is it happened. And I'm leaving David."

I could tell she wanted to argue or at least say something in protest, maybe ask what happened once more, but she didn't—and I thought it a godsend. Instead she just hugged me, and it was better than a million different words she could have said. I knew this wouldn't have been the end of it by a long shot, but for right then I was okay with it.

The next and last time I saw my husband was the day we met to sign our divorce papers. I had to have my father take me out of town to find a lawyer that would actually help me. The courthouse in town had just refused, insisting their reputation was more important. Maybe my marriage needed as much improvement as my relationship with God. Looking back, I couldn't have been more thankful to leave such a town.

He sat on the opposite side of the table frowning sullenly at me, but it only made me sick. He wasn't drunk yet, surprisingly, looking like he normally did when he came home from work and began bitching about dinner before even fully through the door. His face was sunken a little, embarrassed by the situation. It made me feel a little bit better. I signed the paper and slid it across to him, making sure that my face didn't show how much I was struggling with the process.

"C'mon, Bet," he tried reasoning, his hands clenched in fists that just made me think of what they felt like. "I'm sorry, alright? Just...look cut the shit, you know? You're making it worse for yourself as much as me. I get it."

His words held about as much weight for me as they had for the past three years or so, which was almost less than none. It was always the same firm-handed pity party, one that I could almost recite in my sleep. I took time to imagine him like one of those overdramatized villains in the films my grandmother would take me to as a little girl – much to my mother's disdain – giving him a dastardly moustache to twirl, turning his skin an awfully pale grey-green color. Anything to see him as something he wasn't in reality, my husband.

"You know if I sign this you gotta leave town, right? I mean, nobody's gonna want some divorcee with a crooked nose and nowhere to go." I smiled to spite him as he verbally abused me in front of my lawyer. All of these words, but he knew I had won and that was all that mattered.

"I'd rather have nobody than have you anymore, David." The silence in the room following made me feel so powerful and so small at the same time, like a cosmic shift had occurred in the universe but we were the only two people to notice it.

He signed the paper with an exasperated huff, and the flood of relief I expected never came. Truly I didn't know what came next, didn't even know where to begin. Despite what he said, I wasn't looking for anyone else. I was just looking for me. No car of my own, husbandless, crooked-nosed. Growing so accustomed to spending my days cleaning and my nights cooking and avoiding my husband's wrath had become a major pitfall to my newly single self.

But at least things only looked up from there.

DANIEL WALKER

Stage Fright

It was an inspired idea. The marquee above the theater read DREAMS OF BARLEY, and all the advertising material – posters and the like – indicated that the play was a drama about the life of an Amish family in the 1800s. But when the audience sat down they found a carefully bound, 115-page script sitting atop each seat. There were 150 speaking roles in the play, one for every seat in the house (which, tonight, only held 46 people). This was an unusual work – a stark, surrealistic examination of a wealthy urban community sinking into despair and irrelevance. Every audience member's lines were highlighted in green ink. When the lights went down, four actors in period garb walked on stage, sat down on stools, and stared expectantly out into the audience. For the duration of the first act, a tension flowed through the audience, exacerbated by the clearing of throats, the rustling of pages, and the tremulous reading of dialogue. When there was no one to read a certain part, silence hung in the air until someone else rushed in to fill the void.

When the first act break came, some playgoers ducked under their seats and paged ahead in the script, eager to gain knowledge of their imaginary fate. Others tried to make a break for it, only to be met outside by a team of small, effeminate stagehands, who hissed “*What are you doing out here? They NEED you on that stage! Let's go, chop-chop,*” as they maneuvered the hapless patrons back into the theater. The house lights went on, the second act began, and it wasn't long before everything began to fall apart. Some people leapt into their roles, screaming every line and chewing every scrap of scenery. Some people started to improvise, recasting themselves as mythological heroes or fourth wall-breaking cutups. Families denounced each other, strangers leapt into the arms of strangers, imaginary architecture was toppled, and the line between the real and unreal blurred and dissolved like ink on wet paper.

Across town, on a bedspread the color of liver, the Comedian was coming to an unpleasant realization. *I've dried up.* He'd left the TV on while he slept, trying to gain some kind of subconscious inspiration. Only one problem: he forgot to sleep. Sunday school programming was on – a mural of Eve, reaching up for the apple. Expression vacant, hair draped over her breasts. He fumbled for his pen and notepad, scribbled something down:

Adam And Eve + Fig Leaves + God Likes Looking At Butts?

There we go, he thought. Five minutes of material, easily. 0+5=5, if I remember right. He cloaked his eyes with cracked palms, then lay back on the bed in defeat. Six minutes to showtime. Six m- *oh, God!* In one stumbling motion, the Comedian rolled out of bed, staggered across the floor, and hopped out of the doorway.

By the time he got to the theater, a play – some period thing – was letting out already. He fell out of the cab and ambled up the sidewalk, window-shopping for material all the while. Across the street, a girl in an army jacket standing outside a deli. Sign out front – “HERO SANDWICHES – 24 HOURS.” *Hero sandwiches – what’s so heroic about them? Cause heart attacks, clog arteries – Too Seinfeld-y. The bit goes.* The jostle of a passing shoulder. Crewcutted young guy, Weezer record tucked under his arm. *Weezer – there’s something funny about that. The singer, that Rivers kid – doesn’t he have some sexual hang-ups? It’ll do.* So far, this was the Comedian’s internal setlist:

- *Steven Seagal Is Fat Now*

- *Weezer*

- *God Loves Butts*

Not bad, he thought. Maybe I’ll get a special out of it. Call it *God Loves Butts*.

The Comedian walked into the theater’s lobby and found himself in the mouth of hell. There couldn’t have been more than fifty people in the lobby – none of whom looked like they were there to see him – but they were all utterly crazed. Grown adults pummeling each other, women yowling and dancing spasmodically, spooked old men dismantling the theater by ripping up carpet and kicking holes in the walls. The Comedian had made a career out of being scared, but nothing had ever scared him like this. It reminded him of when he was a kid, and of the nightmares he would have after a bad TV movie or a sojourn into the mossy basement. He worked his way through the maelstrom and found himself backstage, in a near-bare green room the size of a supply closet. Rifling through his pocket for notes, then remembering that he didn’t have any, The Comedian hesitantly made his way towards the stage. Whatever that was that came before me, he thought, it’s gonna be an impossible act to follow.

The Comedian emerged, trying not to break a sweat under the house lights. In the audience sat four people and four people alone, clad only in Amish dress and expectant smiles. He mentally crossed out the entirety of his setlist.

It’s gonna be an impossible act to follow.

COURTNEY DUCHENE

Amelia Earhart disappeared into my Vagina:
an ode to Cunts, Menstrual cups, and all things Woman

Cunt, A Goddess,
the Body of Her,
an Orchid Chalice as revered as
Her Altar-seated cousin, bearer of
the body of christ.

She dove Midnights into
My Canyon of Ancients,
emerged from the Sipapu into My
Vestibule Foyer.

there, She built a Fourth World inside My
Uterine Wall. crafted Clitoral Skyscrapers
from My orgasmic shudders –
8,000 Earthquake Nerve Endings.

My Ovaries, Her Sisters,
The Hard Being Women of
East and West. Each day They hummed
guttural Orca Harmonies
in praise of her Varicose Belly.

They crafted opalescent Ovum.
sheltered Thousands of lost, forgotten Women
in the soft Champagne folds of my Anatomy.
Amelia Earhart flew over Labia Majora,
Labia Minora. Sybil Ludington rides side
saddle through My Endometrium

and they row backwards together through Cerulean
Colorado River mocking adam, zeus, every
man/child/god who believed pointing and naming was
akin to architecture. who believed that Life could be
Created by anything other than the churning flow of
Womanhood. anything other than erosion and time.

Cunt Goddess, who built Zion
inside me. I fold her praises in
Palm Creases now that I have learned love for
My Woman Loving Self,
Now that I have been known by my own hands.

SARAH HOWELL

How to Remove a Stain

Step 1. Make the stain. This part is simple! Do something wrong. Be clumsy or just plain stupid. Spill a glass of red wine, cry hysterically with cheap mascara on, cook marinara sauce without an apron on, leave your tampon in for too long, drink to the point that you get sick and then don't make it to a trash can in time.

Step 2. Now that you've successfully created your stain you'll need to get mad at yourself. Shout something, FUCK!! How could you be so goddamn stupid?! You imbecile! That was your favorite dress! You spent much too much goddamn money on it to just toss it in the washer and hope for the best! It's ruined because you were a sloppy dumbass.

Step 3. Evaluate the damage. Choose your product. Will you go with a common household item or does the material of the dress call for that heavy duty shit? Decide on seltzer – the dress is delicate, and you don't want to stain it with stain remover. You never drink seltzer anyway and you only keep it in the house for when your mother-in-law decides to randomly pop in with her suitcase ready for a long weekend visit. She bitches that your tap water tastes like mud, so you started buying water bottles. Then she bitched that you were ruining the environment with your non-biodegradable bottles. The lecture about your mud water will almost always progress into a lecture about A. why the hell I haven't put my uterus to good use housing her grandbabies yet or B. how you better not be after her sons money and she'll be slightly more polite than that, maybe, but she'll always scold your husband for the fact that he didn't get a prenuptial agreement when he married the ditsy gold-digging whore.

Step 4. Pour the seltzer on the stain. Watch the bubbles crash to the fabric as they begin to form their own little puddle that holds above the fabric. In the puddle the bubbles hit the fabric and begin to rise. You're not sure, because you were only a philosophy major in college, but you think that the bubbles pick up the stain with it. Let that sit for a couple of minutes, give yourself a chance to sit too.

Step 5. Run hot water directly over the stain. Not cold, not room temperature, not warm. Scalding hot. Let the water burn your hands while you hold your dress there. Your nimble fingers are always freezing, it's

nice to feel a temperature other than arctic even if it is the other end of extremes. Stare out the window in front of the sink and contemplate how the fuck your life got to this point. Barren, unemployed, and unhappy. There will be so much to contemplate that you'll lose track of time and feeling. The timer on the oven goes off and you snap back to reality. Your hands are bright red and they burn. The skin on your knuckles will start to peel but you can just bandage them; it's no bother.

Step 6. Look at the tag of the dress for cleaning instructions. You're not sure what temperature water to put the washer on when you run it. Find out that it's dry clean only. Roll the dress up into a ball and hurl it across the living room. Drop to the floor. Burry your face into your knees. Feel your upper thighs developing rug burn as your shaking body rubs against the Persian carpet your dead aunt gave you in her will. Cry. Keep crying. Let your face feel the sting of salty tears. Let the burning sensation in your eyes echo that in your hands.

Step 7. Let your breathing slow. Get your shit together. Wipe your eyes. Notice the makeup that's now staining your index finger. Look to your knees, where you just laid your head to cry. Notice the arc of wet mascara that has found a home on the bottom hem of your skirt.

Step 8. Repeat.

MATT DWYER

Suburban Summer

Mating bullfrogs
rock their hums
like a rusty swingset.
Same creek-nestled
park where too-young
youth fumble through
beige curtains,
exeunt spirit;
chemical choreography
displaced from context,
performer's garb
stitched from thin
misconceptions and
sequins glinting
morse-code-false
confidence.

GISELLE HORRELL

Family Pruning

The unfortunate lovechild of baby powder and cheap incense dominates the air. It is the first sucker punch that strikes any visitor when initially walking through the sliding doors into the reception area. From Cozy Oaks' reception area, the visitors have the choice between the Normal Care Ward or the Memory Ward. I don't know what the Normal Care Ward smells like.

Behind sealed doors that would blare an alarm if opened without the passcode, the Memory Ward evolves the odor with the addition of soured perfume, pureed mush, and fresh piss. No matter how many hours you stay there, you never get used to the stench.

I'm playing Flappy Bird on my phone because it is a less unnerving experience than the familiar scene unfolding before me.

Mommom is scooping up spoonfuls of mush from the plate in front of Poppop, shoving them in his mouth at a faster rate than he manages to swallow. Some mush dribbles out of his mouth and onto his shirt. She stares at it with a scornful eye. "C'mon, Artie, what're you *doing*?"

"Mom, he's not doing it on purpose," my mother says from Poppop's other side.

Mommom lets out a blustering sigh. She then notices he is nodding off. "Artie? Artie!"

His head pops up. "—Huh, wha?"

"C'mon. Eat your food."

He takes the spoonful that is offered and then takes the opportunity between that spoonful and the next to nod off again.

Noticing, Mommom huffs and tosses the spoon onto the table.

"Dad?" Mom gently rubs between his shoulder blades. "Wake up. You're gonna be hungry later." She stills her hand when he lets out a snore.

Mommom whimpers, a single hand on her face. "I just don't know what's wrong with him."

"Mom, you know what's wrong with him. We've gone over this. For months."

"I just don't know what's wrong with him."

My mother sighs. "Mom, it's a brain disease. He's losing his brain power. Feel lucky he still recognizes you at all."

I'm personally not sure he distinguishes us from any of the maintenance staff on duty anymore, but it's a nice thought. Though, I don't believe Mommom thinks so, because I hear her muffle a whine.

Just then, Poppop's head lolls a little, bumping into my mother's shoulder. My mother jolts as though zapped. "Dad!"

Poppop snorts himself awake.

"C'mon, Dad, sit up. Don't want to fall off your chair now." She scoots him in even closer to the table, squeezing his stomach against the edge. "You gotta eat, or you'll be hungry later."

"He must be so lonely up here by himself," Mommom says.

I squish myself into a smaller position in my chair when I see my mother's face turn thunderous. Here we go.

My mother throws the spoon down harder onto the table than Mommom could have hoped to have done earlier with her weaker arms, and Mommom flinches a little. "I cannot *believe* you. I cannot *believe* you are doing this again. If you're gonna mope and whine about him feeling all 'lonely here by himself,' *move up here!!*"

"Oh, no! I don't want to, Alice!"

"And why not? Because you're too damn selfish. That's why. You can't even take care of yourself anymore. You can't walk. You can't drive. What exactly do you plan to do when *I'm* not around to take care of you?"

"Oh, Alice—!"

Since I'm the only one facing the door out of the Ward, I'm the one who sees him stride inside. Uncle Jake, all six foot two of him, shoves the doors to the Ward open like he's making his entrance on his personal talk show, and struts through the doors with the confidence of the host. His arms spread wide the second he catches sight of me looking at him from where I'm seated, in a chair a fair distance from the table where the ruckus between Mom, Mommom, and Poppop is going down. He then notices the commotion as well, and lets his arms fall – only to swing one back up again to have a finger cover his lips, and I have to fight my grin from growing and giving him away.

True to form, he hops right on over to Mommom, pops a big kiss on her cheek, and smiles when she startles a little, an open-mouthed look of joy forming on her face. "Hey, Mom!"

"Oh! Jake!"

His shoes stick slightly to the floor – which is never *not* sticky from all the food and drinks spilled on it from the various residents – as he walks over to my mother and smooches her forehead. "Alice."

"Jake."

Then he bends down and plops one atop Poppop's head. "Hiya, Dad. How're you doin'?"

Poppop says, "Huh?"

Uncle Jake looks toward my mother, and she tells him that it's been an okay day. He nods and turns back to Poppop, reaching out to touch his back. "That's great! Glad to hear it."

Mom huffs like he said something offensive and walks away to help one of the other residents who has been hovering around the same area for several minutes, looking lost. While she doesn't work here, she did work in a hospital years ago and knows how to handle such situations. Plus, she always says the workers here are underpaid and understaffed, so she likes to help prevent incidents when she can. But I know an excuse when I see one.

Uncle Jake's attention shifts to me. "Hey there, kiddo!"

I'm too far away from him for him to reach me without letting go of Poppop's shoulder. As much as I love him, I'm not gonna get my shoes sticky unless necessary. So, from my seated perch, I wave and blow him a kiss, which he catches in dramatic fashion. "Hi, Uncle Jake!"

"Whatcha doin' over there?"

"Fiddling with her phone," Mommom says.

"Yeah? Well, how's that new car treating you? Heard you just got your license, right?"

"You know it," I say, giving thumbs up.

"I'm so glad you came. It's great to see you," Mommom says to him.

"Yeah," he says.

"He's truly been *awful* today." She's glaring at Poppop now.

"Well, it's not like he can help it."

"Artie, wake up! Jakie-boy's here to see you. Don't be rude."

"It's all right, Mom. It's okay."

"Oh, no it's not!"

He puts his hand on her shoulder and whispers something I can't hear.

She waves him off. "Jake, oh, Jake! I'm so glad you came. You don't know what it's *like*." She sobs a little into her hands.

I look away and wonder where Mom went off to.

I hear Mommom blow her nose with a handkerchief she most likely pulled out of Poppop's pocket. He's the only one who ever carried handkerchiefs. Must be a habit from when he worked as a mechanic.

"Mom, honey, we know. We know it's so stressful for you to see—"

"Oh!" She waves her hand in a silencing gesture, and, just like the obedient kid he once was, he grows silent. "Not that. Not that! Though, yes, he's absolutely *terrible*. But, no—" she glances at me, and I pointedly look lost in my phone. "—Alice wants me to move out, wants me to live up *here*." Her last word is so weighed down by contempt that I'm surprised gravity doesn't send it crashing to the floor.

"Well, would you be happier here?"

"Of course not! I'm not like those old biddies up there knitting tea cozies. I've got a *life*!"

"Then you don't have to move, okay?"

"Oh, Jakie-boy! You're too good to me!" She makes to throw her arms around Uncle Jake, but he's too tall and she can't stand. She's still wiping at her eyes by the time Mom comes back.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Mommom says.

"That ain't nothing."

"It's okay, Alice," Uncle Jake says.

My mother huffs and sounds like she muttered something like, "Can't bury and forget everything."

Just then, an aide walks up to our group. The aide informs Mom and Uncle Jake that she can't find Poppop's dress shoes in his room. Mom scowls and makes to go with her, but Uncle Jake volunteers before Mom can get out a word.

Once the two of them are gone, she turns to Mommom. "I heard what you said to him earlier."

"Huh?"

"You know that gets under my skin."

"What does, Alice?"

"He doesn't show his hide for a month, doesn't call in weeks, and the second he arrives, you treat him like he's your savior or something. Like he's doing you this big favor showing up. Meanwhile, who's shuttling you here every day to see Daddy? Who's constantly moving around her schedule, her children's schedules, so that you can come here each day, so you don't have to feel guilty about leaving him here? Which, by the way again, would be easier if you just moved up here so you wouldn't even *need* to feel guilty about—"

"No, no, Alice!"

"See! This is what I—"

"Mom, just leave it alone!" I'm surprised to hear my voice.

By the way Mom's and Mommom's heads whip around toward me, they're stunned too. But, of course, Mom recovers first. "Excuse me?!"

I swallow and will my jaw to remain shut. Instead, it clenches along with my hands that are wrapped around my phone. "Just drop it, Mom. She doesn't want to. Uncle Jake says she doesn't have to—"

"Oh! *Uncle Jake* says so, does he? Well, let's just all listen to wonderful, perfect Knight Jake come to save the day. Let's see if he comes at three a.m. when she calls because she ended up tripping in the shower. You know, like he so obviously did the last *five* times."

"Maybe he will! Maybe he'll treat her with respect when doing so!" I shout. The staff has been listening in for the last four and a half minutes but none of us seem to care anymore.

"Round up your stuff! We're going home!" She storms away in the direction of the bathroom but stops and turns around before heading inside. She points first at me, then at Mommom. "And let's all get something clear, right now. *All* of you would be *n o t h i n g* without *me*."

As soon as the bathroom door shuts, Uncle Jake magically appears from down the hall. He swoops down and kisses me on the cheek, then goes and repeats the action on Mommom's forehead. "It's been lovely stopping by again, but I was only here for a short, lunch-break visit. You know how my boss gets."

Mommom grabs his hand before he escapes. "When will I see you again?"

"Soon," he says, and she releases her grip. He slips out the door seconds later as though he had never been.

Mommom gazes longingly at where he left.

I'm just drifting off in thought when a ball suddenly nails me in the arm, and, looking up, my eyes lock onto Poppop's eyes, and all I can remember in that moment is that mine are the same golden-brown.

Poppop's nails tickle the table's surface as he reaches in my direction.

Looking at the wrinkly, tanned hands, I'm vividly reminded of that time, almost ten years ago, when they were interlocked with mine. It was their fiftieth anniversary, Mommom's and Poppop's; everyone was crow in our living room, standing off to the sides with the pair of them at the center. The two of them were swirling around slowly, embracing one another as their wedding song played in the background.

I, of course being around six at the time, couldn't quite understand why no one else was dancing. Everyone was laughing and smiling and cheering my grandparents on, but frowned, or refused to join in when I

tried to grab them for a dance. Mom and Dad were filming, so they were out of the question. Uncle Jake refused to get up from the couch, and my sister was sleeping on top of my brother beside him. Aunt Georgine was clapping along to the beat but swatted me away when I went to grab her hand.

So I went up and tried to make a three-way with my grandparents, since no one else was in the mood for dancing, for whatever reason. With grumbles from the other adults around us, Mommom and Poppop broke apart a bit, so that they could each grab hold of one of my hands and started swaying me along to the beat. Both of them smiled down at me as we danced until the song ended, and then Poppop shot out a hand in a sneak attack to tickle my stomach.

Picking up the ball from the floor, I roll it across the table to him. He grasps it and then flings it back. More ready this time, I react, stretch, and miss, the ball hopping to the floor again.

"Zero to two," I say after fetching the ball once more. Phone now in my pocket, I give myself over to a game of Table-Catch with Poppop.

I lose count, but I know he ends up winning anyway. The match stops when he refuses to fling it my way anymore, and he mutters something low under his breath. I step closer until I am right beside him. "What did you say, Poppop?"

Looking right at me, he says a string of gibberish louder, cracks a smile, and waits. Ah, a joke, then. I smile back and laugh. His eyes light up, and he laughs with me. He's slapping the table by the end of it, which catches Mommom's attention. "Ah, no no. Don't do that."

She grabs Poppop's wrist.

I shrug at her dour look. "At least he's happy, I guess."

She pats the table to get his attention. "You need to stop it. You need to, or you'll never get better; you'll never be able to come home."

"Mom." The word is a warning. My mother is standing beside us again; they've been over this, too, for months.

Mommom waves her off. "Jakie-boy was here to visit you. Isn't that nice?"

"Mom, here's your coat. Put it on."

Mommom does, and we're out of there and on the car ride home faster than I remember blinking. The ride is as stony and silent as a graveyard, and when Mom and I get home after dropping Mommom off at hers – Mom helping her walk inside because she's too stubborn to use a cane – I think I know whose funeral it is.

Mom's sitting at the kitchen table. "I can't believe you did that."

I carefully sit across from her. "Neither can I."

"How dare you. How dare *you* take his side, *their* side after—"

"What? After you harassed them like you always do?"

"No—that's not..." She rubs a hand across her face and leaves the table. She comes back with a large bottle of wine and a large book I recognize.

I vividly recall the one other time I saw it, some dreary afternoon at Mommom and Poppop's house when I was around ten. Mommom and I were sitting on the couch side by side with the book lying across our laps, a rickety bridge connecting us through time.

Mommom turned the pages over until we were a third of the way through. Photographs filled with various children decorated the pages, each shielded from ruin by thin plastic sheets.

"Who's that?" I said, pointing at a picture of a child standing uncomfortably in front of a lilac bush.

"That's your aunt Georgine."

"And that?"

"Uncle Jake," Poppop said, head in the wall, fixing some faulty wires.

"How do *you* know?" Mommom asked.

"Because you always show 'em off in the same order."

She pursed her lips, then flipped a few pages over and addressed me once again. "Can you find your mom?"

"That one!" I jabbed the smiling little girl wearing a sundress who looked like my sister in the face with my index finger.

"Yup. What a chubby one. Loved pinching those arms."

I pointed at the boy plopped in the center of a tin, circular kiddie pool bathed in off-colored sunlight. "That?"

"That's your Uncle Jake again!"

"The photo looks weird."

"It was one of the first ones we got in color. We didn't know what we were doing." She flipped the page again and gestured at the set of photos, all of couples, as though showing off a complete collection. "Prom pictures. Look at your mom there with that handsome boy. Thank God she married your father instead."

We went through her children's lives up to the present, including their children's lives. Once we were caught up, she turned to the front cover where names followed one after the other like Kris Kringle's Naughty and Nice list. "I keep track of everyone right here."

Giggling, I pointed out my name scrawled near the bottom.

"Joyce. Yes, that's you."

That's when I noticed one violently crossed out. "What's that?"

"Typo."

I made out the letter *V* before she closed the book with decisive finality.

Now, that very same book gets flopped onto the table before me with a bang. My mother looks at it a second, then says, "Sorry."

"Where did you get this?"

"Slipped it out of your Mommom's house when I helped her inside. Didn't you see me come out with it?" She pushes the book closer to me while her other hand fiddles with the cap on the bottle.

"Ah, no. Was on my phone 'til you hopped back in the car." I don't know exactly what she wants from me, so I flip the cover open and stare at the list of names. For old-times' sake, I try to decipher the name viciously crossed out, but I still can only unveil a *V* and, even then, am not sure it's even that letter.

"My brother." My Mom's whisper startles me — I had forgotten I wasn't alone. She appears to have given up on opening the bottle and is cradling it against her cheek.

"Yeah, Uncle Jake—"

"No. My *brother*. Our brother — no, mine." She shakes her head as though trying to loosen the memories from their storage shelf. "Baby boy — sweet child. Hardly ever cried 'cause he was too busy laughing all the time. Was four, I think. Jake and I were in the living room, doing whatever. Mom was ironing somewhere. And suddenly — I don't know what happened! He was gone. The life just left him. He'd been sitting on the floor, and — I don't know — got too close to an outlet, maybe? He got electrocuted, somehow — sometimes I think that, maybe, things would have been more bearable if we *knew* what we could have done different —

"And you know what *they* did?" She waves the bottle around in a sweeping motion, and I fear that it will slip from her hands. "Everything — everything went. All of it. His clothes, his toys, his *name*." She takes a breath. "I remember coming downstairs the night they took his body out of the house and seeing Mom sitting by the trash can, tearing through the photobook and snipping every picture of his to shreds. Dad was, well, quieter, after his death — didn't boss us all around nearly as much and let Mom do that to my brother's things. Georgine was too young to really remember any of it, so she was least affected — even though Mom and Dad seemed to cling more to her. And Jake — well." A dark look crossed her face.

"I think he managed to forget our brother's existence more thoroughly than anyone else. Though, he certainly did a good job at filling both his spot and our brother's in our parents' eyes. Always tried to smile

harder, laugh more – even though he was always quieter, more somber and serious than the rest of us before. It was as if he absorbed our brother's personality when he died, and then refused to acknowledge where it came from. But Mom and Dad didn't care – two sons for the price of one, I suppose – and Jake ate the attention up, even at the cost of eclipsing his brother in our parents' hearts. He helped erase even the memories that were left of my baby brother."

Touching the crossed-out name, I say, "Every last one?"

My mom hums and says, "No. Not all." With that, she takes the book back and flips through it, and, once she finds the page, she spins it back around for me. She's pointing at the smiling boy bathed in off-color light.

"No, that's Uncle Jake. Mommom told me."

"She just thought it was Jake. They both look so alike as toddlers." She pulls it out of the plastic sleeve and hands it to me.

I finger the delicate edges and stare into the squinting eyes set into the illuminated face. With great care, I turn the photo over in my hands. Then I stare at the name engraved on the back, staining and condemning the photo with the unholy sins:

Vincent

1965

I flip the photo back again and touch the child's cheek. *Hello, Uncle Vincent.*

"You know," mom whispers, "it's terrible knowing you're only loved by someone based on what you do for them. And, sometimes, not even for that."

The sound of the neighborhood school bus roaring past our house jolts us both out of the haze we had both fallen under. Quickly and carefully, Mom snatches the photo from my hands and tucks it away in a top drawer before shutting the book again.

Only when she puts the book on the counter and the full wine bottle on the floor, do I find my voice. "I—I didn't know."

"I know. But now you do."

"Well, I won't forget him. I'll remember with you, through yo—" I look up from where I was staring at the tabletop to find my mother has left the room to greet my sister in the hallway. Conversation's over, I suppose.

The next time we visit Poppop, we last longer before we all have to leave. Mom and her Mom are arguing vehemently again in that way that goes nowhere, recycling the same old arguments in the same useless way one tries to get a dud seed to sprout in different soil. I look back at Poppop sitting still in his chair, seconds before the door seals me off from

the scene, and imagine Uncle Vincent, an adult, standing beside him, leaning down to hear his jokes and never letting go of his hand.

I'm a little rough around the edges,
 An irregular polygon in four dimensions,
 A function with far too many holes approaching the x-axis,
 Closer and closer to zero but never quite touching it.
 We used to be lines zigzagging in the real plane,
 Meeting at points of concavity
 Where you traced my asymptote
 From bound to bound
 With your integral finger—
 And we lose each other.
 In the middle I shoot off into the imaginary plane,
 A world of numbers too cryptic for mere x, y, z,
 The sad, lonely square root of negative one—
 Left you behind and never quite came back.
 Maybe we were only meant to intersect,
 Maybe you're the line headed deep into the positives,
 Maybe you're better off being a tangent to
 My parabolic, downward tilt.
 You thought we converged at every single value but
 Infinity is just a sideways 8 and
 I could never quite parallel you.

BRANDON CAREY

Quentin & Sylvie

Quentin sat on the walkway outside the University until the very first flicks of evening began to glow from the west. Lifting his briefcase, the thin rattle of the Risperdal seemed to drown out all other sounds. *Take your pills, Quentin.* He checked his watch. He always took his medication with tea, which was now well passed. *Text Sylvie now. Begin writing emails. Make an arrangement to meet with President Tsui by the end of the week.* Without hesitation, he took the medicine and headed for the metro. The ride was eerily quiet, not simply due to the sweeping chaos in his mind, but there was very little conversation in the train. The train peered out of the tunnel in Sha Tin, on the north side of the New Territories, where Quentin lived in a flat with his girlfriend. He got Sylvie's text. She was working overtime to overlap with American markets opening. It was only Tuesday, but even Quentin's limited knowledge of financial markets told him that a massive selloff would likely occur before the weekend to bolster the impending brain-drain in the United States. Sylvie worked with HSBC Bank in what she described as "the failsafe department," which was the self-governing think-tank within HSBC that moved company assets around to protect from market instabilities worldwide. *She's been working a lot lately.* Needless to say, American markets, those days, mostly produced insecurities.

But at least HSBC has been moving into less caustic assets. Solar, wind, things like that. Is that insider trading? No, that was in a press release. *Did I know about it before the press release?* No, Quentin and Sylvie never really talked about the nuances of their jobs to each other. Money bored Quentin, and modernist literature never piqued Sylvie's interest, and she tended to avoid the denser literature of her second language. *Can she afford the apartment by herself?*

"Hey, love!" Sylvie opened the door to the flat. There was a countryside English cadence to her accent. Not quite Bradford, not quite Brummie. Certainly a product of attending a British School before the 1997 handover. Quentin was waiting for her, jasmine tea steeping on the glass coffee table. He had a nervous smile, as he gestured for her to sit. In front of them, twilight ignited the jungly hills of Sha Tin through the top-floor window, the Shing Mun River glowing an orange bronze color. She pursed her lips. "Something's wrong."

"You're a wizard, Sylvie." Quentin chuckled. "Come on, I have some bad news."

She sat down, sliding her briefcase on the coffee table. Quentin poured her tea. She asked, "It's about the whole visa business, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Quentin sighed. *Get to the point. There's no point in delaying.* "For businesses, colleges, or whatever, hirers could have people working while they worked on the sponsorship papers for H-1B's. People would get temporary status, and when sponsorship cleared, they were golden. The administration has...frozen all H-1B's in the process of being approved. Anyone who wasn't greenlit before Friday at 23:59-" *The 24-hour clock is so useful.* "-is losing their temporary status, and they're all getting deported. Which means a lot of the international staff of 'Florida International University' is being sent back to their homes. Which means..." Quentin looked up. His lip quivered. "I- I need to go back home."

"Is..." Sylvie sighed through her tea. "Is it contractual?"

"Yes. For another academic year."

"Oh..." she blushed. "Well...that's not terrible. We could, you know. Still..."

Don't let her look behind the router. "You...you'd still want to do that?"

Sylvie managed to smile, "Yes. I would. I know we love it here, but Hong Kong is no place to raise a child. They need space, fields to play in. Beaches to swim in that aren't crowded with tourists."

"So I should never tell you how touristy Miami is then?" *Don't let her look behind the router. Don't use the internet. Just in case. Hide it somewhere else.*

"I know. I studied for a semester in Portland, you know. We *did* drive from New York to the Florida Keys at one point." She looked down again. "But..." Sylvie stood, and walked over to Quentin. He rested his head on her shoulder. "Quentin, it'll eventually end, right? The craziness of certain governments...they always come to an end?"

"One would hope." Quentin brushed her neck with his nose. "But it hurts a lot now, you know?"

"Yeah." Sylvie smiled. "So...how do you want to spend your last couple of months here? I have a lot of vacation days."

"I can't just leave my students..."

"Yeah, but you get Tuesdays and Fridays off."

Taking one week off wouldn't be the end of the world. "I appreciate that, but I need to take some meetings and make some calls first."

"Take all the time you need. But you-" She poked him on the nose. "-are coming on holiday. You still haven't been to Japan."

"I went to Tokyo for a conference!"

"Doesn't count. Besides, too many tourists in Tokyo. You need to see Mt. Fuji. Kyoto, Miyajima. Getting fresh-made street taiyaki from the source...it's the best feeling in the world."

He chuckled, "I'll...I'll arrange for it." Quentin stood up, looking for his mobile. "This'll only take a bit, I promise." A headline from *The Independent* crawled across his screen. *How...how are they suspending American medical insurance? I...what? How did Michael wean himself off of oxy...cutting his meds? I need to halve my pills...*

Early morning Kyoto on that 3rd of April, sunlight poked through the petals of the cherry blossoms the canal churned, water roared as the ring of bike bells pittered here and there and there the sign pointed to Gion Street, the Geisha district adjacent to the legendary Yasaka shrine. A few middle-aged men in suits that were just a bit too big for them bowed before heading past Quentin and Sylvie who were holding hands just coming out of the train station. *I thought the Japanese weren't very religious. How come there's such traffic at the shrine?*

"I thought the Japanese weren't very religious." Quentin stated. "Also, can your friend Kazuko-sama come with us to Miyajima?"

"She should be fine to! We were gonna day trip Hiroshima and Miyajima on Saturday, remember?" She furrowed her brows, "Are you okay, Quentin?"

"Yeah...there's just...a lot on my mind."

"That's the only answer I get these days."

Quentin scratched his ear. A crane flew into the canal. It dove, surfacing seconds later and perching itself on a scrap piece of concrete. "Well, there's a lot to think about. Do these shrines have a guided tour?"

"Most do in Kyoto! If only they had these at Fujiyama..."

The shrine gate looks just like how it does in every bad anime I've seen...tall, orange paint, furled base, edges tilting up as if to hold up a piece of the sky. "When can we get taiyaki, Sylvie? Is it like, just for tea time?"

"Ha! No, you can get it any time after lunch really. Um... outside of Toyko and Osaka, Japan tends to shut down at like nine at night. It's not like Hong Kong at all."

Sylvie led Quentin up the stairs into the shrine. There was no entrance fee, but a 200 yen "donation" was encouraged. Before them, a pathway of pebbles wrapped around the dozens of tiny temples within the shrine. A flowering cherry blossom stood over an arched bridge, koi fish swimming between the two ends of the pond. Aside from the voices, there

was only the hum of the wind, the trickle of the water, and the occasional chirp from a sparrow. *How is it so quiet here?*

"It's peaceful. People have been really nice so far, air's clean. Our hotel is pretty fantastic. Food's incredible. Booze is weird, but that's okay."

"Not a fan of salted grapefruit beer?" Sylvie chuckled.

"No, but the honeydew and watermelon sherry was surprisingly strong." *It calmed my mind for an hour. I only have two pill halves left.* "I'll keep that in mind for the flight back." *I only have two pill halves left.*

A line of elementary aged kids queued for a chance to ring the bell in the middle of the shrine. The bell sat as if it were purposely erected symmetrical to the face of the hills behind. Like the tambour of a march there was a quiet resonant chord struck every five seconds. There were monuments to people who had recently passed away; a few old women burned incense sticks clapped their hands together and bowed before the entrance to the viewing rooms. "I think we should be able to make it to the monkey park in Arashiyama by this afternoon."

"Can't that wait? It's not even noon yet."

"Sorry, I'm just th-"

"Stop thinking. I'm beginning to seriously consider if bringing you on this trip was a good idea, Quentin." Sylvie crossed her arms. *She's right. I can barely focus on walking in a straight line, and every moment my eyes are open I see the headlines and all the chaos. The only time my mind is quiet is when I'm asleep.*

"Maybe my timing was off? I'm still not...recovered. And uh, you know." *The finality of departure is all-consuming. Everything hurts. Reality is dissolving me.* "We might still be a bit jet lagged, right?"

"We're only an hour ahead, dude." Sylvie rolled her eyes. "Just promise me you're gonna have fun, okay?"

"I promise."

After leaving the shrine, the two boarded another train for Arashiyama, the town next to the famous monkey park. Through the window, between the advertisements for beauty products and the AEon mall, the rice paddies of central Japan curled by them. Some were already flooded, most still to be planted. Thin clouds sat gently in an impossibly blue sky. Sylvie napped on Quentin's chest.

He took his phone out *big mistake* and a push notification for his news app, which he tried desperately *don't read it* to switch off, indicated that the honoring of different visas for US passport *don't fucking read it* holders had essentially become a *reductio absurdum* and it was at the core case-by-case-country-by-country Belarus Poland Morocco Slovenia

Austria Denmark stated they would deport any US passport holders who tried to come in after the 15th of May and only Canada the United Kingdom and Germany said they would still honor American passports *If Denmark is going to seize passage, then what about China* Quentin looked into his shoulderbag and remembered fighting back the urge to heave and sob that he had no pills no insurance and a passport that was becoming less useful than university toilet paper.

Focus on the monkeys it's a 900-foot climb almost vertical in several places with no grip, focus on the monkeys watch foot placement, where hands are going focus on the monkeys focus on the monkeys guide one step in front of the other focus on the monkeys the announcement in the traincar chirped, "*Koko wa Arashiyama-eki. This is Arashiyama Station.*"

"Is this us?" Sylvie stretched. "Oh my gosh!" Sylvie brushed Quentin's cheek, trying to find what his eyes were looking at. "Are you okay?"

"A-anxiety. Saw a bad headline."

"Damn those push notifications...Can't you turn those off?"

"No." Quentin wiped a thick film of sweat off his forehead. "Let me delete the app." *It's gone.* "It's gone. Let's...let's find some water."

Arashiyama was cooler than Kyoto, especially on the top of the hill where the monkey park overlooked the basin that holds Nara to Kyoto to Arashiyama and a thin breeze kicked up some of the dust on the summit. A juvenile macaque clasped a chunk of an apple in its paws, nibbling at the skin.

"They're like furry little kids!" Quentin laughed.

"They're...really fighting for those scraps." Sylvie crossed her arms. "It's almost poetic."

"Don't wax philosophical on me. Let's just feed them and enjoy this park." Quentin put his hands on his hips, exerting a thin, nervous authority. "Is...is this working?"

"You...could work on your assertion. You're trying to be a Plankton when you're a SpongeBob at heart."

"So I'm squishy and full of holes, and I live in a pineapple underwater?"

"No, well, not exactly." Sylvie rubbed her chin. "In all honesty, from all my interactions with you, your biggest problem is that...you're gentle. You're not a very forceful or commanding person, and you use your patience and stoicism to your advantage. You're not a very good capitalist. And...you do let people push you around sometimes. Myself included."

Quentin nodded. The sun ducked behind a cloud, and the mountaintop felt a bit greyer. "You think I need to stand up to my bosses? My government? I'm just one man."

"You need to be better at fighting for what you believe in. And for you...that doesn't mean going into the streets or going to demonstrations. Use your brain to fight."

He buried his face in his hands. "My brain-" his voice was almost completely muffled, "is slowly killing me."

"Then stay two steps ahead of it! Whatever it takes."

That's an impossible task. Impossible. "I'll try my best."

It was Quentin's last day in Hong Kong. It was getting dark out as he clasped the lock on the storage unit his friend had loaned to him. *Rotary lock...I'll set it to 10, 09- the tenth of September. The day Sylvie and I had our first date three years ago. In case she needs anything of mine.* The Shing Mun River was flowing heavily from the day's intense rainfall. He put his hands in his coat pockets. *Weaning myself off of the pills worked. I've got a doctor's appointment four hours after I get off the plane in Miami. I'll be set.* Quentin's phone vibrated, which meant he was getting a personal call. He pulled it out.

"Wai?"

"Qu- Quentin, it's Sylvie. Can you come back to the flat? We should talk."

"S-sure." Sylvie almost immediately hung up.

The street lamps were on now, throngs of people funneling along the Shing Mun River. Some were on their phones, some talked to one another. Quentin was looking at the turbulence forecast for his flight. Little to none. When he walked into the flat, Sylvie was standing in front of the couch, her back to the window. She'd been crying.

And she had the ring in her left hand.

"Quentin...why didn't you tell me?"

Run. Just grab my bags and run to the taxi stand or the bridge.
i...thought it was unfair
Unfair how?

Run, dammit sylvie... i don't know if ill ever be able to come back to hong kong they froze every visa application while we were in japan work marriage student travel vacation even even if we got married you couldnt come with me theyd detain you as soon as you got off the plane i i bought that ring the week before the election and i was going to ask you on christmas but all that changed
do you still love me

of course i still love you sylvie but you care about certainty and the way things are going i dont know whats going to happen if i stay here i dont know if a us marshal will detain me and force me to go back with them or if the hong kong or chinese government would consider me a risk nowhere on earth except russia and fucking central african republic are accepting our passports anymore and the fact that you look and talk different would make you a target even if i could take you back to the us right now

that we could work it out, right theres always a way
sylvie quentin pulled her into a hug she dropped the ring what you said in arashiyama im not as strong as you im not as assertive all i can give you are my love and my promises but this time i cant promise you if it can be worked out if there is a way i cant promise your safety

is it really that bad

ice is mounting deportation raids in my hometown two black kids were shot dead last night and everyone not on pills or in jail is arming themselves waiting for their neighbors to try and shoot them

christ

sylvie quentin picked the ring up and put it back in the box you make me want to be better and i will get better but this whole thing is going to take a long time were gonna need to wait he slid the box into his back pocket i love you

i love you too she ran a finger along his jawline eyes glistening like skyscraper lights from below the surface of the sea please come come back to me

the flight was at noon the two didnt say much to each other on the ride to the airport there was some traffic on the last bridge before the terminal *come back to me* before the rail in front of the cathay pacific check in counter they shared a final kiss and as quentin sank deeper into his panic on the way down he could only hear sylvies words repeating one after the other and getting softer and softer come back to me *come back to me come back to me come back to me come back to me come back to me come back to me*

JOHNNY MYERS

Howl
(after Allen Ginsberg)

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, shrilling
bodily nudity,
sagging each other through the gentrified streets at dawn in search of a
cupcake boutique,
scuff-stitched hipsters roaming from coastal city to city, to ride bikes and
write software,
who underemployment and freelance work afforded them the weekend
coffee shop, twirling mustaches and wondering how the next chapter of
their typewriter novel should end,
who went to church only when their grandparents were looking to see if
their grandchildren were going to end up like the Jesuit monks,
who floated through liberal colleges, sporting fake glasses and tartan
touring caps and dreaming of Minnesota's lake homes and sleepy
tenure,
who graduated at the top of their class and ended up emotionally no better
than their high school selves,
who took men's and women's razor blades as a joke from out-of-touch
corporations, men with pink handles and women in black,
who grew beards like wizards and astounded children around them,
inspiring hope and awe from their mystical facial hair,
who poured sriracha, aioli, fennel and avocado paste on honey bread in
empty warehouses with geometric succulent plotters,
ordering an Airbnb for the most exotic cities, sleeping in luxury scuba
caves bleeding sulfuric smells,
who took Uber upon Uber up and down the City, vaping marijuana and
cookie dough nicotine, in excitement to see the children's zoo,
who strung Christmas lights in July and put on a playlist of no-name
musicians, playing cards and drawing on scrap paper,
who messaged each other through the endless nights, sleepwalking in each
other's text messages,
a small army of chairspinners drowning in startup development, yearning
for a new dawn and the next Oscar-winning film,
digging through library books in search of a history that their small town
may have forgotten throughout the recessions,
who had communist iconography and symbols as bumper stickers on their
fully-automated cars,

with the poems about poems published online for the world to see, edited and revised, to remain in the annals of history for thousands of years.

EMILY SHUE

Butterscotch

Sugar slide slick of my tongue tasting yours
every Friday morning with our socks on. I ride you
like a sugar high. You know I
need that daily dose of chemical sweetness,
need you
yellow and sweet, melt in my mouth, saccharine spit swimming
with the garish pink glaze of your tongue.

Tear me open with your teeth. Unwrap me. Chew and suck and swallow,
you know I love it when you swallow
me
piece by piece because with us, every day is Halloween and yes
it's scary but we don't care that our teeth are rotting.
I close my eyes and leak syrup.
Offer you a taste.
Break your sugar tooth off
on my neck and slide it in,
baby, roll it against your tongue,
smooth and solid. The doors of my candy store are
wide open so shut them with a sigh,
lock them with a moan,
sticky sweet honeyed hot breath in my ear and I tell you
chew to the rhythm, harder
harder grinding
your teeth til that delicious
crunch, flavor burst, and you candy coat my face.

Sugar slide slick of my body wanting yours
every Friday morning. I lick the flavor from your
fingers. Plunge mine, sticky, so deep
in my bag, searching for that last piece before I come
over, and finally, your mouth slick on that butterscotch button,
pressing hard
candy til I finish,
baby, finish
the whole bag, legs trembling.
And all before 8:00 on a Friday morning.

MALCOLM LOH

Wonderbread U

Down here in Philly, we don't have much. Every school day is filled with screaming students being arrested, thrown in the back of police cars, snarling pit bulls on chain link leashes, and the screeching of the metal detectors. Graduating from Martin Luther King George Washington Carver Malcolm X Barack Obama High School, into a neighborhood with an 87% unemployment rate, I was looking forward to getting the usual job dealing meth to pregnant teens and school children.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, came my acceptance letter, with full scholarship, to Wonderbread University: the best and most diverse university in Pennsylvania. Though it was strange that I was accepted when I didn't even apply, a free ride's a free ride. I graciously accepted the "Look at my African American Over Here" Scholarship. Over the summer, there was a mandatory orientation called "How to Not Scare Your Cultural Superiors." Eager to learn, I pulled up in my 1987 Chevrolet Caprice onto campus. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The streets were literally paved in gold; from my car, I could spot a tower-like fountain streaming water miles above the halls.

I saw students with \$600 haircuts, white shorts, pink vineyard™ shirts, cardigans tied around their necks, and they were all carrying tennis rackets! Many had butlers trailing behind with sports drinks on silver platters.

"I could get used to this," I thought.

As I got out the car to greet my new classmates, some began running away, while some brave ones stayed long enough to dial 911 into their phones. Suddenly, eleven police cars converged on me from all directions. As I attempted to explain by pulling my scholarship letter from my pocket, they all opened fire.

I woke up covered in bandages in a hospital bed. There was a big bouquet of flowers and a "get well soon" card from Wonderbread U on the bedstand. To my left and right, I was amazed to see others of various races looking pained and strapped down to beds as well. All equipped with their own sets of cards and bouquets. I wanted to leave, but the intense pain from my wounds kept me in bed.

After some time passed, a suited 7 foot tall, black, bald man with a goatee walked in. He looked at all of us and spoke out to the room of downed students, "Hello everyone and welcome to the 'How to Not Scare Your Cultural Superiors' orientation. First of all, I wanted to apologize for

all the attacks upon you students. Believe it or not, all of you are quite intimidating, and this was the only way to gather all of you in one room. My name is Mr. O'Seal, and I am Wonderbread's Faculty Race Representative. Before I came here, I was an aspiring actor, so you may know me from my star role as Shabam in the 90's film of the same name."

I remembered that movie. It wasn't great. If my memory was correct, O'Seal was actually a basketball star. He was forced into retirement because his team was too "culturally diverse." Since then, I was pretty sure he's been starring in shitty commercials and generally becoming a joke among everyone.

"So, the reason why y'all are here is because of the Wonderbread's '63%' program. As you may know, the percentage of America that's mainly white is decreasing, so our dean, Brooke Blimbarg, gave you all scholarships, so you can actively represent your ethnicities to your 'superiors' in a confined setting."

As we all laid in our beds, not even the pain from bullet wounds could mask the confusion on our faces. O'Seal could tell by the looks that he was losing us, so he continued to speak.

"So in addition to your free rides, the school is willing to pay each and every one of you selected students a weekly wage to represent your races on campus." The confusion only spread further. "In order for you to effectively represent your backgrounds during the day, each you will go to specially created classes, obviously designated by race, teaching you how to more accurately represent said race. All students of African descent will go to Savagery 101, where I'll be teaching you 'how to look intimidating by doing nothing,' 'how to make fried foods,' 'how to attract the police,' and 'how to properly get shot for wearing a sweatshirt.' The Spanish and Asians will go to the same classes, because let's be honest, they can't tell you guys apart anyway. There, my coworkers Ms. Elsie Chan and Mr. Enrique Maqueda-Hernandez-Gomez-Melendez will teach 'how to get perfect grades by cheating' and 'how to headshot someone with a sandal from across the room' respectively. Here at Wonderbread, we aim to teach our students the truths of our increasingly diverse country through 'authentic,' direct exposure on our very own campus, so we ask that you please participate."

I looked at my wounds, then at the idiot speaker, then at all of my pained brethren. From what I could understand, this job paid me for acting as the degenerate, immoral savage that people want to see me as. . . Meh, if I was getting paid—fuck it, why not?

REN TOSCANO

Wolf

we used to sit in the woods.

I was 14 they were all 18 and we sat in the woods.

I wanted to feel something I told everyone I was a witch.

witches don't have an age they've lived forever.

I am 14 he is talking about third eyes, he's too old for me. they all are.

I think I'm too old for them. I think I'm too young for them.

he thinks I can't keep secrets but I am keeping at least 12.

you keep secrets when you're a witch.

you can keep secrets about anything.

like how the elvis impersonator who went to my church touched me once.

like how sex really did hurt the first time I was just too polite to say anything.

it wasn't because he was big it was just because I was small and I wasn't ready and it hurt.

like how he steals candy bars at work for me

and I say something about "who cares about capitalism"

but I'm 14 I don't know anything about capitalism I'm just a kid.

he is telling me about me. and how he wants to cover me in blood.

"like a sacrifice?" I ask.

I care too much about his opinions he is so stupid he is. smart.

"no like that video I saw. that we saw. you saw it, that one video.

that we watched together," he tells me.

we can't all be perfect.

I tell my mom this every day.

"why are your grades so bad?" my mom says.

"we can't all be perfect," I say to her. I am still 14.

she says she doesn't like me hanging out with the older kids.

she says how can they be my friends when we are so different.

they are going to college or to get jobs and I am taking geometry tests still.

"I won't be taking geometry tests forever," I say.

it's true. I haven't taken once since I was 14.

in the woods we smoke cigarettes.

I feel really elegant and cool because I don't cough at all

but that's only because I don't inhale. I am 14.

"I want to dye my hair black," I say but no one is listening no one really cares.

my hair is brown. "I think it'll look better black," I say. I shove him.

"don't you think?"

"think what," he asks.

"my hair will look better black, right?"

he is never looking at me he is always looking everywhere except me.

"I love you," he says.

"I love you too." my stomach is boiling. like hot water on a stove.

I don't feel good.

love is supposed to make you feel good.

but I feel like I have rocks where I should have organs.

"my mom would kill me if I dyed my hair black."

I dream he is a wolf and I am a girl. I am 14.

everyone tells me to stay away. "he is a wolf and he will eat you."

but I'm not scared. I know everything.

and in the heat of the summer in a hot basement

when we have sex and it hurts so so bad and

he is bearing his wolf teeth and he is still touching me and I

am bleeding and I am weeping and saying everything

except for no I will think "if this is what it's like to know

everything then what is it like to know nothing"

ROBIN GOW

Sarah

I have never felt like my name fit me.

I used to make nicknames up for myself in elementary school—I was “Pollywog” in fifth grade or “Saga” because I wanted to sound like a journey. They never stuck—I always ended up being “SareBear” or just “Sarah.” When I was being confirmed in the Catholic Church, I took identity in my chosen name—a Native American martyr. Originally, I had wanted to use the name “Frances” for Saint Frances. He was the patron saint of animals. On his prayer card, he was sitting in the sunlight underneath a lush tree. Frances seemed so happy. So calm. So gentle. I wanted to love God like that—like sitting in the sun.

My catechist clarified that it was typical for students to choose saints of their “own gender.”

“You didn’t even talk about any other names?” I asked.

“No—why? It was ‘Sarah’ or ‘William,’” Mom said from the sofa, scrolling on her iPhone.

“Nothing at all? That’s so lame.”

“Your father loved his grandmother very much,” she said, sideward-glancing up. I was sitting at the breakfast counter.

I guess I had hoped that my parents had some other name that they considered for me. They had originally thought I was going to be a “boy” and settled on my grandfather’s name—“William.” Three years later they would name my brother that.

I have told my parents I’m transgender, but I haven’t asked Dad to call me “Robin.” It seems too soon. Dad picked my name. I know “Sarah” is a piece of us. “Sarah” is a piece of him. If I could, I would tell him I love Sarah too. I love the Sarah I was and the Sarah where I came from.

Sarah picked out Dad’s clothing all the way through high school. She held up another dress pants & blazer combo for him to try on. Dad sighed. He didn’t protest. His legs started to hurt from following her around the men’s section of Gimbles to find him some “suitable attire for after school.” He went to Mother of the Divine Providence, so they had uniforms. Sarah said, “A gentleman should always look his best” even after school.

“Hold out your arm,” she instructed as she clipped a pair of cuff links to his white dress shirt. Dad felt like his whole body was buttoned together. “The collar scratches at my neck.”

“You’ll get used to it, honey. It’s what young men wear.”

"For a basketball game?" Dad asked.

"Of course—you never know who you'll meet."

He watched himself in the full-length mirror outside the dressing room. The suit's sleeves were a little bit too long for him.

"Oh dear—we'll need another size then."

He followed her back out to the racks.

"Mother loved to cook for everyone," Flo remarked one day when I asked about her. "I loved Mother—it was such a shame when she died—she loved those boys." By "those boys" she means my sixty-year-old father & fifty-eight-year-old Uncle Rich—but to them, they will always be "those boys." Those boys in baseball shirts—playing records in the basement—taking off their shoes & leaving them at the foot of the stairs for someone to trip on—

The aunts' stories about Sarah are always strikingly domestic.

Sarah took the place of my father's mother when she died. It's true the aunts shared the weight—but they didn't carry it like Sarah did. Sarah sewed for him—set the table—a hunk of chicken casserole on his plate on Sunday—pet his hair when he felt empty & had no words to describe—knotted his white socks & sat with him on the porch in the summer while he drank lemonade after an afternoon on the tennis courts.

She sat at the end of the row for his graduation. Sarah watched him on the stage the entire ceremony as her movie reel whirled. Dad was her second son. He was becoming a man. She saw him growing—he would pass priests in their full cassocks on his way to class at Villanova—he would study business like a sensible man does—he would fall in love with a nice Catholic girl—he would get a job with pension—he would wear nice navy suits with gold cuff links—he would kneel in the second row of pews for mass each Sunday & on Sunday nights he would come home—home to her house where he would always belong.

Sarah was a writer of children. A writer of futures—a mother to four daughters and two sons and now a mother again. Dad was the one with the grades. He was the one with the tangible future. Uncle Rich was an artist, so she didn't push him the same way. Sarah sat with Dad while he put the postage stamp on the Villanova application. She told him how great it would be to be a businessman like her son, Jack. Sarah had the formula for the men Connors were supposed to be.

She wanted what was best—I know—but dad never had a passion for business. Dad keeps chapter books stacked by his bedside. He leaves Civil War magazines dog-eared on the bathroom sink. He writes in the margins of poetry books. He owns every single Kurt Vonnegut book. He

quotes Hunter S. Thompson nearly every family dinner. When I was little, he read to me until I fell asleep.

My father's world—his love—is so rooted in books.

Business was what success looked like for her. She was just trying to show that she loved him.

Dad dropped out of college three years in.

Offhandedly, Dad said, "I could have been an English major... maybe History."

Love used to be easier for them. When Dad was in middle school, he reenacted as a Revolutionary War soldier at Valley Forge. Together, they leaned over bunched up cloth. Sarah taught Dad how to fashion square-headed period-accurate buttons. They couldn't use a sewing machine, because the stitching needed be authentically hand-done. She pricked her finger. Dad brought her a napkin to dab up the tiny speck of blood. He took over for her. He tried to weave the needle in & out. His line of stitches was wonky. He held up his work to show her. She smiled & she plucked the jacket from him. She ripped out the row—slowly snipping each black thread. Lightly & patiently she said, "No, look, like this."

Dad watched the needle—glinting beneath the desk lamp at her sewing table.

Even when she didn't need help, Dad sat there.

"Would you have liked to be a soldier?"

"I don't think so. I think it was cold," Dad said. "I could have managed though."

"Why be one now, then?"

"I like to pretend... to learn."

From the Malvern Library, Sarah found Dad books about the Revolution. Worn blue & maroon covers—she stacked them on his desk.

"Yes, like that," she said. She snapped a picture of him standing in full uniform when the outfit was finally complete. He was standing in the rec room next the framed picture of JFK.

I admire her for that—for that kind of love made from the work of her hands—it's the kind of love a distant & often frustrated boy like Dad probably needed at age ten living in a new area with a new school in the house of his three aunts who were all also mourning the loss of his mother. It was & is a silent mourning—a mourning so cavernous that emptiness still lives in the walls & the picture frames of their house on Regimental Road.

Could there ever be enough room in a house like that to grieve?

Mom tells me that the aunts used to drink Manhattans & blame Pop-pop for killing their mother—"making her work like he did." The

aunts needed someone to blame. God lived up the street in a tabernacle. He wore white. He burned an oil candle. Their God knew they said "Hail Marys." Their God watched them take the Eucharist on their tongues. No, their God was not to blame for the death of their sister. Their God was a witness.

Dad says Sarah was never like that. Sarah never blamed anyone for death. She took death differently. She was gentle & sturdy. She was someone to lean on even if she could only love in the form of lamp lights & wooden buttons for a Revolutionary War soldier who was also my father. He was also a boy not ready for the war. Would he have been a drummer boy? Would the sound of his drumsticks have pattered like sleet?

"Are you crying?" she asked Dad. He was sitting in the living room playing with his metal cars.

"No," Dad said, wiping his nose.

He had moved in a week earlier.

"I don't cry."

Sarah nodded. She sat on the sofa next to him.

He began to cry.

"You can miss her. We can miss her together."

"She liked the blue car best," Dad said—holding up the metal Volkswagen. Sarah took the toy.

"She would have looked good driving one."

I do have pictures of Sarah. She's not a very large woman. Thick glasses like Aunt Mary & her hands are folded in her lap. She's wearing a long plaid dress with an apron. She has a poof of hair—grey & smoky like a gentle passing rain storm. There's another one of her smiling with her eyes closed—teeth showing & goofy. In a lot of pictures, she's in the background cutting birthday cakes—picking up dish towels—holding the house together by her apron strings—the seamstress to make the soldier's uniform.

Sarah baked pies from the pears that grow on the tree in the backyard. After she died, no one has baked anything with the pears again.

Some years the tree doesn't bear fruit, but the aunts don't notice because they don't go back there anymore—they don't want to bake pies—to them it's just the tree that sometimes drops green pears—rotting into a mash on the lawn & attracting bees.

I go back there every time I visit to check & when there's green pears in the yard, I gather them up in a plastic shopping bag. They're always crunchy & not really close to being ripe. I keep telling myself I'm going to bake a pear pie.

I would be her great-grand-son. She could make a uniform for me this winter. We could sit up all night in front of a desk lamp & maybe she'd remind me how to attach a button—take my picture in the rec room & I'd look like my Dad—

It's a pear year—the year I changed my name.

VALERIE OSBORNE

Mirror

It was too cold to take a shower.
In the throes of winter blues, my skin had once again found herself deeply
in love
with this itchy, striped sweater and the down of my arm threads through
the cotton. There is no part of me that deals well with separation anxiety
and
I felt guilty hurting myself on purpose. So, I kept my sweater on and spent
the rest
of January staring into the mirror. When you look too long in the mirror
you can see
yourself the way you see old friends who no longer look like the pictures
from your
eleventh birthday party: crowded around a folding table in the Rocky
Springs
multipurpose room, faces blushed with lights from eleven candles. Those
friends
look like strangers now, like people who have never seen the back of a
bowling alley, who have never seen you put out a fire with one long
breath.
In the mirror you look like a picture of yourself that you wouldn't care to
keep,
and I know I wouldn't want a picture of myself in this striped sweater.
This sweater
is too sentimental. This sweater picks the Schnauzer in Monopoly. This
sweater
watches Lifetime movies and cries at happy endings. I like to keep my
second driver's
license in the change pocket of my wallet. That's the girl I see when I am
not
looking in the mirror. She wears the glasses with the red frames and smiles
in the
photo because she thinks she is not supposed to. In Pennsylvania, a second
driver's license means you are young enough to drink and drive, but not
quite old enough to do it in a rental car. And I would like to be that old
forever, in red glasses and long hair.
I had long hair then. Not the hair I have now, cut dry with a pair of craft
scissors.

I cut it myself because I read a book and I wanted to feel the way Maryška did

when she cut off the long hair that trailed behind her bicycle.

But Maryška is not an important character in the second half of the novel and I just felt alone, so I dug my hair out from the trashcan and kept it in a pile on

the corner of my dresser so that when I felt lonely I could still hold it screaming in my fist.

I can't remember myself with short hair, I can only remember how those splintered edges

hurt, uneven and biting my skin. In the mirror there's a ghost with the same bite marks as me.

She looks like she died in a rental car accident, I think I could've known

her once, in a pile of old photographs my dad took to mark how I was getting older. But I check the change pocket of my wallet and I do not

know her now. She turns on the shower fully dressed and closes the

curtain, too afraid to detach from an itchy, striped sweater. And I smile as

I turn out the lights of the bathroom because I am glad to be no ghost and I smile partly because

I think that maybe I'm not supposed to.

CONTRIBUTORS

CLARA BAKER is a junior Health and Exercise Physiology Major who enjoys butterflies, rainbows, and science. She also dabbles in writing and was extremely thrilled her piece was accepted this year!

JULIAN BAROCAS is an English major of the class of 2021 who takes photos. Not all of his photos are of statues, but they are all spooky.

JASON BENNETT is a junior majoring in both physics and mathematics. He has conducted quantum control simulation research and plans to pursue a Ph.D. in physics and is passionate about teaching physics and math through being a teaching assistant and tutor.

MADISON BRADLEY is a senior MCS and English major, Film Studies minor, who enjoys magical realism and podcasts.

TEDDI CAPUTO is an artist and wants to thank her mom for everything.

BRANDON CAREY '18, is a senior English Major, who hopes to one day discover how to turn memes into a sell-able good. Meme cryptocurrency is an option. Memecoin. Has a good ring to it.

FAITH CARSON is a junior English and Biology double major who enjoys Cinnamon Toast Crunch a little too much. She wants to formally thank her family for their endless support and publicly call out her sister Summer for stealing her favorite pair of athletic shorts before going off to college.

SYDNEY COPE: I'm a junior Neuroscience/Studio Art major; I've had a passion for both digital and film photography since early high school and have continued the eternal art struggle ever since!

KIM CORONA: Born and raised in New York City, Kim Corona enjoys consuming large amounts of bubble tea and jalapeño chips. You'll never catch her wearing pants that aren't cuffed.

TAAHIRA DAVIS is a junior Theatre major and is ecstatic to be included in this year's Lantern! Her interests include singing, dancing, acting, writing, and being an altogether quirky person.

SARAH DEFELICE is a maker of humorous medical puns, fan of periodically sharing intriguing or obscene science facts, and a junior double-major in Spanish and Biology.

CHIARA DEMELFI is a third-year student who wishes to thank their family, their friends, and the demon with glowing red eyes hiding under their bed. They also wish to express their undying devotion to the amorphous horror which bangs on the window every night and growls threateningly through the vents.

MILLIE DRURY is a freshman who loves sushi boats and is having an identity crisis because she cannot decide on a major. Any input would be lots of help, thanks.

COURTNEY DUCHENE is a junior English and Media and Communications Studies double major and a Creative Writing and Film Studies double minor. She has had her work published in *The Lantern*, *Blue Route Literary Magazine*, and the poetry collections *Pennsylvania's Best Emerging Poets* and *Minnesota's Best Emerging Poets*.

MATT DWYER likes to scramble rhymes across the lawn like dandelions. His poems are dedicated to Louis Armstrong and crooning bullfrogs, who happen to be kindred spirits.

SAMUEL ERNST is a first-year student from Emmaus, Pennsylvania. He likes memes.

MYA FLOOD is a senior theater major who loves sipping tea and reading plays that make people laugh. Much thanks to Delta Pi Sigma.

SOPHIA GAMBER accidentally flushed her student ID down a Wismer toilet the first week of freshman year. She's been desperately trying to find herself ever since.

OLIVIA GLOVER is a senior Media and Communications major with a Studio Art minor. During her junior year, she studied abroad in Florence, Italy and fell in love with the city while studying Italian Renaissance art.

ROBIN GOW is surprised he made it this far relatively intact. He will be graduating with a degree in English and has been so lucky to work with so many talented, amazing writers at Ursinus. He also answers to "daddy."

JADA GRICE is an English major with minors in African American and Africana Studies and Media and Communications Studies who is a member of the class of 2019. She was raised in Philadelphia and has always had the loving support of her magnificent parents, Mr. and Mrs. Grice, her three fabulous siblings Jessica, Jillian, and Joshua, and princess of a cat named Latte.

ALBERT HAHN has made peace with the typo in his bio from his first Lantern and wishes he had more interesting things to say.

MARIO HEITMAN: the fastest cat in all the land.

JULIA RAE HODENFIELD's favorite words are: dazzle, duvet, cherub, and dainty. This is her fourth and final year in the Lantern.
#NotMyPresident

GISELLE HORRELL is an English major at Ursinus College, who hasn't been seen since she graduated a semester early. Though, rumor has it, if you go to your local library, you can still hear her voice coming from a collapsed stack of books...

SARAH HOWELL is an English and Education double major with the hopes of becoming a high school literature teacher. She is a member of the class of 2019.

NICOLE KOSAR is a Psychology major and a Creative Writing minor who likes to talk about herself. She hopes her personal life helps others feel less alone.

KEVIN LEÓN was born in Houston, Texas.

MALCOLM LOH is a time traveler and author/artist from the future. Using his knowledge of the future as a canvas, he creates art and stories depicting what our world will come to in the upcoming decades.

JOE MAKUC's Ingredients: Cucumbers, Vinegar, Sea Salt, Garlic, Dill, Red Pepper. Refrigerate After Opening.

MORGAN MCAFEE is an English Major from Berwick, Pennsylvania. Class of 2021.

JOHNNY MYERS is an Economics and English double major. He makes soap and keeps bees.

VALERIE OSBORNE doesn't remember what happened next. And maybe nothing happened.

JANICE PARTEE: I think it's crazy to try to sum myself up in 1-2 sentences.

MEGAN SEAR is from Allentown, PA. She's a senior majoring in Dance and English and is grateful for the opportunity to have her writing in the Lantern.

EMILY SHUE hates tomatoes with all her heart and soul.

PAIGE SZMODIS is a senior English and Gender and Women's Studies major who will soon somehow miss the daily expeditions to the third floor of Olin. She also beats up meninists in the library after school.

REN TOSCANO can recite the entire Twilight movie from memory.

KARA TRAVIS believes if the glass is half empty, the glass is too tall.

ROBERT VARNEY: Member of the class of 2020, double majoring in Studio Art and Media and Communications.

DANIEL WALKER is the thief who steals pies from the windowsill of mankind. If you see him in public, don't be alarmed - he always looks like that.